# Cruel and Beautiful World

**Summary:** After years of captivity, Hermione Granger fights her way onto the streets of Voldemort's London with only the knife in her pocket and the blood on her hands. There's a checkpoint on every corner, a curfew enforced by Voldemort's most trusted followers, and the only way back to the Boy Who Lived is through the Death Eater who let her be captured in the first place. DM/HG. COMPLETE

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# Chapter 1: Run For Your Life

**\*WARNING\* - This story is going to be very dark. It deals with rape, murder, torture, foul language, and two very broken souls. NOT MEANT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART. This will be my only warning.**

**A/N: That being said, I am so excited to start this new story. I am posting it exactly one year after my very first post on this site. This one is, of course, very different. I have wanted to write a dark story for a while because they are my favorite to read.**

**Oh! There is a time skip in this chapter so I italicized the first half to make it clear.**

**So yeah, I don't own Harry Potter. Everything belongs to JK Rowling.**

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*Hermione fell back at the impact of the blast from Bellatrix and Mrs. Weasley's duel. They were going at it pretty strong and Molly was refusing the aid of anyone who tried to help. She wanted to finish this woman - if you could even call such a monster that - off herself.*

*"Mum!" Ginny cried as she jumped up after her own fall.*

*Hermione took a moment for her head to stop spinning before getting back to her feet. She scanned the room for Ginny, finding her just as Bellatrix sent her flying backwards again with a simple wave of her wand. Molly was livid. She tried to retaliate by throwing everything she had at her but Bellatrix was just too strong. The witch threw another Killing Curse and, this time, it hit directly over Molly's heart.*

*Molly's body went stiff, her eyes bulging as she had a small moment of clarity before toppling over. She landed with a thump, her eyes still wide open and lifeless, and aimed right at Ginny. Voldemort turned and looked, letting out an uproarious laugh as he blasted Kingsley, McGonagall and Slughorn backward.*

*"MUM! NO!"*

*Ginny tried to run to her but her brother, Charlie, grabbed her before she could and carried her kicking and screaming from the Great Hall.*

*"Hermione!"*

*Hermione turned to see Ron running towards her.*

*"Ron! Your … your mom! I … I'm sor -"*

*"I know. I saw," he said, cutting her off as he tried to hold back his tears. "Where's Harry?"*

*"I … I don't know. Where's V-Voldemort."*

*They both scanned the Great Hall, their eyes not stopping until they found Voldemort and Harry looking at each other. They slowly began to circle one another.*

*Hermione and Ron were just about to run to him when Harry loudly announced, "I don't want anyone else to try to help." They halted. "It's got to be like this. It's got to be me."*

*Just then, Yaxley successfully maneuvered George and Lee Jordan off of him. He slammed George to the ground and sent Lee flying backwards with a blast so strong it nearly split him in two. Hermione and Ron were close enough that his blood splattered onto both of them.*

*When Arthur and Percy turned to check on George, Thicknesse made his move and escaped from under them. He began dueling the two of them while Yaxley set his sights back on George. Ron and Hermione stepped in to help but the Death Eater had a newfound strength that they were no match for.*

*All around them, the Great Hall became chaos once more. Walden Macnair, who had been faking unconsciousness, jumped back up and began shooting Killing Curses at anyone who crossed his path.*

*People began to flee as the battle took a turn for the worse. Throughout it all, Hermione and Ron lost track of Harry. The only way they were able to find him was by following the eyes of everyone who was still frozen against the walls. He and Voldemort had not struck yet, a clear glimmer of panic was visible in Harry's expression as he realized how quickly they were losing control.*

*And then both wands lifted, aimed at each other as Harry put all of his hope into one final spell.*

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

*"Expelliarmus!"*

*A thundering bang echoed through the Great Hall as both spells collided, creating a bright burst of golden flames. Each wizard continued to hold their arm strong.*

*Right versus Wrong.*

*Good versus Evil.*

*Love versus Hate.*

*There was no question about who should have won that duel. The wizard with the strong heart should have prevailed. The one with his soul still intact.*

*But that was not how it happened that day. The green jet of light that shot out of Voldemort's wand wrestled for control with Harry's spell for a moment, before completely engulfing it.*

*The Hawthorn wand Harry had been holding went flying. He was blasted backwards, his own spell spreading outwards in a way that blocked the Killing Curse from hitting him, but did not protect him from the stone wall behind him. Harry knocked his head and landed in an unconscious heap on the floor.*

*"Harry!" Hermione screamed as Ron held her back.*

*Voldemort came for him again, but several witches and wizards stepped in his way, sacrificing their own lives to give Hagrid time to scoop Harry into his arms and flee with him into the corridors. Ron grabbed Hermione's hand and they quickly followed, running by Narcissa Malfoy as she picked up the Hawthorn wand from the ground.*

*"Hagrid, wait!" they called as he hurried away, but he did not hear him.*

*"AHH!"*

*Hermione and Ron both froze at the sound of the scream, recognizing it as Ginny's. They looked down one of the corridor's to see Fenrir Greyback back on his feet, pursuing her, Charlie, Bill and Fleur with a gleaming, hungry look in his eye.*

*Ron gulped before turning to the girl on his hand. "Hermione, I -"*

*"I know," she said, putting her free hand on his cheek and looking deep into his eyes. "You have to go to your family. I'll follow Hagrid and find out where he's taking Harry. Wait in the forest just outside of the gates and I'll find a way to get word to you."*

*Ron nodded before leaning in and kissing her. "I love you, Hermione."*

*She smiled. "I love you too."*

*"Stay safe," he said before letting go of her hand and running towards his family.*

*Hermione fought back a sob as she swiveled on her foot and took back off in the direction Hagrid had gone. She had barely turned the corner when she ran right into someone with such a force, they both fell backwards.*

*When Hermione sat up, she saw Draco Malfoy do the same. He put a hand on his aching head before looking at her, his eyes immediately widening at something behind her shoulder.*

*Hermione turned just in time to see Thicknesse shoot a Killing Curse at them. Both she and Draco rolled out of its path. When she looked again, Draco was crawling on his elbows and knees towards a body lying on the ground, searching it frantically for what she could only assume was a wand.*

*"Traitor!" Thicknesse called before shooting another Killing Curse at Draco.*

*Draco held up the body and used it as a shield.*

*Hermione jumped back to her feet and shouted, "Stupefy!" sending Thicknesse falling backwards.*

*"What are you doing?" said Draco, throwing down the body. "This is a bloody war, Granger! AIM TO KILL!"*

*"No!" she shouted back at him. "He's under the Imperius Curse. I will not kill the innocent!"*

*"Whatever," said Draco, climbing to his feet. "Your bloody funeral."*

*He glared at her before searching more lain about bodies for a wand.*

*"How many times do we have to save your life before you finally say thank you?"*

*"At least once more," he said, with a quick glance up and a wink.*

*Hermione rolled her eyes. She was about to run back after Hagrid when she realized she had absolutely no idea where he went. And with those giant feet of his, chances were he was long gone by now. She would never catch up.*

*As she stared blankly down the corridor Hagrid had gone down, Draco found a wand behind her. He tested it out but it was a horrible match. This wand would be of little use to him. Still, he held onto it, because a bad wand was better than no wand at all.*

*Giving up on finding Hagrid and Harry, Hermione had just turned to run back towards Ron when someone ran into the corridor.*

*"DRACO!" screamed Narcissa as she hurried towards her son.*

*"Mum!" he screamed back, getting to his feet and running to meet her halfway.*

*With the two of them distracted, Hermione tried to head for the corridor Ron had gone down but, before she got very far, Lucius appeared and nearly toppled her over to reach his embracing wife and son. She noticed Narcissa slip the Hawthorn wand into Draco's hand.*

*Hermione tried to run for it again but, this time, Bellatrix Lestrange turned into their corridor.*

*"Cissy!" she called, aiming her wand at her sister as she stampeded forward. "You have betrayed the Dark Lord! You have betrayed us all!"*

*"No!" Narcissa pushed Draco behind her. "Bella, you must understand -"*

*"I understand that you are a traitor! A filthy, lying, wandless traitor!" Bellatrix smirked before slashing her wand in the air, sending a jet of green light down the corridor and straight at her sister's heart.*

*Hermione slammed herself against the wall as the spell shot by her.*

*"MOTHER!" cried Draco as Narcissa collapsed into his arms.*

*"Cissy, no! My darling, my darling!" shouted Lucius, falling to his knees and cradling his wife's lifeless face. "What have you done?" He turned and snarled as Bellatrix continued to walk towards him.*

*"What I had to do," she said, finally turning her eyes towards Hermione, who was still pressed against the wall. "What do we have here?"*

*Hermione raised her wand but it was already too late.*

*"Expelliarmus!"*

*She and her wand went flying down the corridor. When she looked to see where it had landed, Lucius was just picking it up off the ground.*

*"Break it, Lucius! Break it and grab her!"*

*"Why?" he said evenly, his eyes lost somewhere between grief and anger as he stared at his wife's murderer.*

*"Because Harry Potter has fled! If you want to keep you and your son alive then I suggest you give the Dark Lord something that can lure him back out."*

*Hermione shook her head. She tried to look to Draco first, so she could plead with him to let her go, but his eyes were still blank and focused on his mother. She then looked to Lucius. He stared back at her, torn for a moment before glancing down at her wand.*

*It was clear what he wanted to do. Kill his sister-in-law and avenge his wife. But that was a risk and he had a son to think about.*

*Without any more hesitation, Lucius lifted his other hand and snapped Hermione's wand in two.*

*Hermione winced. "That was yours, you know?" she said, turning towards Bellatrix.*

*"Yes, I am aware. But I have no interest in repossessing a wand that has been held by a filthy Mudblood!" she spat. "Lucius, I will not tell you again! Grab her and take her to the Dark Lord!"*

*Hermione sprung to her feet and Lucius did the same. She was caught between him and Bellatrix with no wand and no exit in between. Still, she had to at least try to escape this.*

*Seeing Lucius as less of a threat, Hermione attempted to run past him but he shot a spell at her, causing her to fly and fall, landing just beside Narcissa's dead body.*

*"Ow!" she cried out in pain as she landed hard on her wrist.*

*Draco's eyes finally focused as he turned his head to look at her. She stared back at him desperately, pleading for him to do something, anything more than just sit there. But Draco did nothing. All he did was open his mouth like he was going to say something but, before he could, Lucius had Hermione by the hair and was yanking her to her feet.*

*"Draco, head home," he said. "Take your mother with you and stay hidden until I come for you. I want to get this all straightened out with the Dark Lord before you show your face again. You understand?"*

*Draco nodded slowly, his mouth still slightly open as he stared at his father, and then at Hermione. "What are you going to do with her?" he asked.*

*"That is for the Dark Lord to decide," said Bellatrix, using her wand to bind Hermione's wrists.*

*"No!" Hermione screamed as Lucius dragged her through the corridors. "Harry! Ron! Please!" She looked back at Draco with one last pleading look while he still sat on the ground, holding his dead mother in his arms. "NO!"*

*And then they were around the corner, her last hope out of sight as Lucius and Bellatrix forced her onwards, leading her towards their Master. Cheers echoed down the corridors as Voldemort and his followers celebrated their victory, knowing very well that not just the wizarding world, but the entire world was now theirs for the taking.*

*And Hermione Granger had just received a front row seat to the hell they were going to create.*

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Hermione awoke suddenly as the carriage came to a halt. Her heart began to race as she looked out of the small, barred window to see where they were. She knew the home but not well. The Death Eater who resided here liked his slaves fresh, and she hadn't been that way in a long time.

A girl whimpered in the seat across from her. Hermione looked at her unmarked skin and sighed. She was young. She was beautiful. He would love her.

The door to the back of the carriage opened.

"There aren't many this time," she heard the driver say as his face appeared in the bright shaft of light. "The Dark Lord has been disposing of more and more of them lately. Been in one hell of a mood since they lost track of that damn Potter again."

The Death Eater, Macnair, poked his head in and thoroughly scanned the goods. His eyes paused for a moment on Hermione. She stared back at him with cold, unafraid eyes that made many of the Dark Lord's followers look right past her, since they feasted on fear.

As expected, he quickly moved on from her to the whimpering girl, not even taking notice of the young man, two beaten and bruised girls or the elderly woman also in the carriage.

"What's this one?" he asked, pointing at her. "Muggle-born?"

"No. Just plain ol' Muggle. They found a bunch of 'em hidin' in the Underground. The Dark Lord had the others all executed on the streets, but Nott requested to keep this one. This is her first run since."

"Yes, I can tell. She's certainly in better condition than the rest," said Macnair, glancing slightly at Hermione. "Bring her out. It's been a long time since I've had such a pretty, young one in my home." He licked his lips.

The girl struggled and screamed as the driver climbed into the carriage and dragged her out by her bound wrists. He slammed and locked the door behind her. All of the prisoners sat and listened in silence as she continued to scream all the way to the house.

Hermione looked out of the small, barred window and watched her until she was gone. She had learned a long time ago that it was a waste of energy to struggle like that. The chains they wore would zap them dead if they traveled more than one-hundred feet from the carriage. She had seen it happen many times before. There simply was no means for escape. Of course, some might argue that death was the better option. She certainly thought about it often enough.

"Such a shame."

Hermione turned to see that the old woman sitting beside her was also staring out of the window.

"Only in these dark times could being so young and beautiful ever be such a curse."

Hermione nodded but she did not speak. She found that it was best to keep

friendly words and names out of these carriage rides, since there was a fairly decent chance she would never see any of these people again.

This old woman she actually recognized from several carriage rides before. She had been a slave since the beginning, just like Hermione.

Suddenly, the doors burst back open and the driver shoved a different girl into the carriage. She was bloody and beaten, her left eye so swollen that you could barely see it behind the large, purple mark. She must have also been a Muggle, because Macnair always treated them the worst.

The girl settled into a seat and began sobbing into her hands as the carriage pulled back in motion.

"Looks like we're headed for the city," said the old woman, still staring out of the window. "That means you have at least an hour to rest." She looked at Hermione and smiled. "Come here, dearie. Go ahead and place your head on my lap. Out of all of our times traveling in this thing together, I have never seen you look so weary before."

Hermione glanced hesitantly down at the woman's lap before looking into her blue eyes, which still shined bright even after all she had been through. Hermione tried to smile back but it fell short. How long had it been since she had last genuinely smiled? And then she remembered. It was the last time she had seen Ron. When he told her he loved her.

"Thank you," she said weakly before laying her body down with her head resting on the woman's lap.

The old woman began stroking her hair, the gentle touch soothing Hermione enough to drift off into a shallow sleep. She didn't know how to sleep deeply anymore, since it was next to impossible when you always had to keep one eye open.

Hermione had no clue how long it had been since the war. It had definitely been several years, but she had stopped keeping track after the first. Mundane things like time only made her life as a slave all the more miserable.

They had these slave trades every two months or so, to keep those still fighting in the resistance from ever finding their loved ones. It was Bellatrix's idea. Hermione had been there when she came up with it. In fact, she was the inspiration. Some Death Eaters were given the choice to hold onto their slaves until the next trade, but not when it came to her. She was required to switch each and every time.

Sometimes Hermione would hear stories about Harry Potter's followers bombarding places she had once stayed, supposedly looking for her, but they were always too late. She had not heard about any of these rescue missions in a long time.

The rumor was that Harry Potter had forgotten about her. Her last owner told her that the Dark Lord had been considering disposing of her, preferably by way of a very public execution. They had meant to scare her, but Hermione had only found relief in their words. Yes, there were days when she still wanted to escape from here and fight, but on other days - most days - she thought of how much easier things would be if she just ended it all.

"We're close," the old woman whispered after what seemed like far too short of a rest.

Hermione sat back up and looked out the window, staring down at the bright lights of London. After Voldemort's defeat over the wizarding world, he had gone for the Muggle one. This city was the first he had taken over. His pride and joy. He resided here when he wasn't out taking over other parts of the world, in the Minister of Magic's old home. She had no clue where Pius Thicknesse resided, seeing as he was still the Minister and under the Imperius Curse after all of these years.

Most Muggle's had fled the city when Voldemort took over, but some were still trapped here, taking refuge in the sewers or the Underground. Many were kept locked in their homes, given only the bare minimum to survive, while others were made slaves. Not a slave in the same sense that Hermione or the other people in this carriage were slaves, but something more like a house-elf, only viewed even lower as far as the wizards and witches who owned them were concerned.

Hermione could only imagine the fear these people felt, finding out that magic existed, and having their entire world shattered and taken from them in one fell swoop. It was so horrible to think about. Even if Voldemort was one day defeated, the world could never be the same. Too much damage had been done. It was the same with her. No matter what happened next, Hermione knew she could never be the same.

There was suddenly something tickling at her ear. She automatically winced before pushing whatever it was away. As it turned out, it was only the old woman moving some loose hairs out of her face.

"You don't look well," the woman said with a frown.

Hermione looked down at her bruised arms that were hanging out of her tattered cloak and sighed. Over the years, she had always been tortured - that was a given - but this last place had really done a number on her. Apparently, the only reason the Death Eater had chosen Hermione out of all of the slaves was because their brother had recently been killed when Harry's followers had raided his home. Since they couldn't get revenge on who they wanted, they got it on Hermione instead.

"Nothing I can't handle," said Hermione, even though she knew she needed medical treatment. There just had to have been some internal bleeding. Her ribs hurt most of all. Sometimes the pain was so great, she couldn't even breathe.

Suddenly, there was something being shoved into Hermione's hands. It was covered by a thick, green handkerchief but she didn't even have to open it to know what it was. She turned to the old woman with wide eyes.

"W-what -"

"You need this more than I do. Get out of here. Find Harry Potter and help him set us all free."

"I … I can't take this," said Hermione, trying to hand the gift back to her.

"But you must," said the woman. "Many of us believe that Harry Potter has not attempted to fight the Dark Lord again because he fears for your life."

Hermione cringed. She hated to hear slaves call Voldemort that, but it started to come naturally after being around Death Eaters for so long. Even she let it slip from time to time.

"If you escape then he will have no reason not to fight."

"That is easier said than done," said Hermione, still staring down at the handkerchief.

"And I have complete faith that you will succeed."

The left corner of Hermione's mouth twitched upwards. "Where did you get this?"

The woman smiled. "Slaves like me are not watched quite as closely as ones like you. I simply slipped it out of the kitchen. Sometimes, Death Eaters forget that there are other ways to harm people than magic."

Just then, the carriage came to a halt. Hermione quickly slipped the item into her

cloak pocket before looking up. Everyone in the carriage was watching her. Hopefully, none of them blabbed. That would be the end of her for sure.

As always, Hermione looked out of the window to see where they were. It was a rather large house in one of the oldest wizarding streets in London. She had been here many times before and knew instantly that this would be her last stop tonight. She was, after all, his favorite.

"I have an extra special treat for you, Sir," said the driver, opening the door to their carriage and letting the Death Eater look inside.

Rodolphus Lestrange poked his head into the carriage and did not look around for long before his eyes fell upon Hermione. They lit up as he smiled. "Well, if it isn't my precious Mudblood. You have returned to me at last. How long has it been? I would say at least a year."

Hermione had no idea how long it had been. It did not seem like an entire year had passed since she had last seen him, but she trusted his concept of time much more than hers.

Without waiting for him to say anything more, Hermione stood up and walked out of the carriage, not even bothering to wait for the driver to come and get her.

"Eager one you got 'ere," said the driver with a wink.

"Yes, she always is," said Rodolphus proudly.

Hermione tried to step down, but Rodolphus grabbed her by the waist and did it for her. Her body winced at the touch.

He frowned and stroked a bruise on her cheek. "Someone has not taken proper care of you."

Hermione moved away. She looked back at the old woman in the carriage one last time before the door was shut and locked. Following Rodolphus, with the driver right behind her, Hermione used her bound hands to stroke the Thestrals pulling the carriage as she passed them. How she longed for the days when they had been invisible to her. But the time of her innocence was long gone.

"Fanin!" Rodolphus called as soon as the front door was closed.

A house-elf instantly Apparated in front of them. "Yes, Master?"

"Go and fetch the other slave immediately. I want to get this trade over with quickly

so the night can proceed."

The house-elf nodded and Disapparated.

Rodolphus looked at Hermione and scanned her from head to foot. "Remove the binds," he said. "I would like to get this cloak off of her so I can see the damage that has been done."

The driver did as he was instructed, even going as far as taking off Hermione's cloak and hanging it in the closet. She stared after it longingly, wishing she had kept the item on her instead of in its pocket.

Rodolphus walked over to her and rubbed his hands up and down her arms, making her shudder. He found his way to her hips and lifted her shirt slightly, taking a peek at the bruises underneath it.

"Clearly, your last owner did not know what they had. This cannot be fixed overnight."

Footsteps sounded in the hallways and they all looked to see Fanin walk back into the room with a haughty looking girl behind him.

"I thought you said I could stay?" she said, crossing her arms and giving Hermione a particularly cruel look.

"That was before I knew what was waiting for me in the carriage."

"*Her*?" said the girl with disdain. "This beaten whore?"

Rodolphus's eyes widened.

"Master, please, I am the better choice. No one can make you feel the way I -"

"*Crucio*!"

The girl fell back, screaming as the curse overtook her. All Hermione could do was watch as this stranger convulsed on the floor, trying hard to grab at Rodolphus' feet.

"Master, why?" she cried once the curse had passed.

"You *will not* speak to her in that manner again," he said through clenched teeth. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes," she answered, crying some more. "I am so sorry, Master. Please! I love you! Let me stay with you!"

"No. You will never stay in this house again."

"NO! Master!"

She reached for his feet again but Rodolphus stepped back and held out his wand, ready to curse her once more. The girl closed her eyes and waited for it to hit but, before he could cast it, Hermione reached out her hand and put it on top of his.

"That is enough," she said, carefully lowering his hand. "I take no offense. Can you not see that she is just hurt?"

Even though Hermione did not want to see this girl struck again, she felt little pity for slaves who fell in love with their owners. Of course, she doubted it was really about that. Out of all of the Death Eaters who participated in the slave trade, Rodolphus was, if nothing else, a safe bet. He did not torture the ones he took in, though he did do many other things to them. Things that some might consider just as bad, if not worse. But, as long as his wife was not there - and she so rarely was - his home was one of the better ones to be in.

"Fine," said Rodolphus, putting his wand away but still taking a moment to kick the girl off of his foot. "Take her away. I never want to see her face again."

The girl continued to cry as the driver put Hermione's old binds on her wrists. Rodolphus took Hermione's hand and led her into the drawing room as the other two exited.

"Fanin, please go into the kitchen and fetch our guest here one of our strongest Healing Potions. We must nurse her back to health immediately."

"Yes, Master," said the house-elf before heading towards the kitchen.

"Now then, let me get a good look at you," said Rodolphus, settling Hermione in front of him and trying to remove her shirt.

She quickly grabbed at the ends and pulled it back down. "Don't."

"But I need to see the extent of the damage, my precious Mudblood."

Hermione cringed as he spoke the name he always called her. She hated it. "No. I don't want you to see."

Rodolphus frowned. "Difficult as always." He grabbed her arm harshly, making her wince. His frown deepened. "Wait here," he said before exiting the room.

The moment he was gone, Hermione ran over to the closet with a slight limp and found her cloak. She dug through the pockets and pulled out the item the old woman had given her. After removing it from the handkerchief, she stuck it in the front of her trousers and pulled her shirt down to cover it. Then she shut the closet and went back to the drawing room.

Rodolphus returned a minute later, holding a small bottle full of a blue liquid. Hermione turned her back on him. She heard him open the bottle and pour its contents onto his hands. He came up behind her and began stroking her arms.

"What are you doing?" she asked, getting goose pimples in every spot he touched with the cold liquid.

"Numbing you," he answered. "There is no way you will be completely healed by tonight, and I still plan on reuniting properly." He moved her hair aside and began running his tongue along her neck.

"Stop it, Lestrange."

"Oh, my precious Mudblood. Won't you, just this once, call me Master?"

"Never."

Rodolphus chuckled lightly. "All of these years and you are still so impossible to break. I might admire you if you weren't so filthy and pathetic." He moved his hands into her shirt and started running them along her bare stomach, just missing the tip of the item poking out of her trousers.

Hermione grabbed his wrist and sharply pulled it away. "Remove your hands from me."

"And if I don't?" he asked, grabbing her other arm and twisting her around so she was facing him. "You forget that, for the next two months, you belong to me." He lifted his hand and used a single finger to stroke her cheek. "I have also spoken to the Dark Lord about possibly keeping you here permanently. If he decides not to execute you then he says he will consider it."

Hermione recoiled and moved her face away from him. He just smiled and ran his fingers through her hair.

How she loathed him.

Perhaps the only thing more pathetic than a Muggle-born who falls for their Death Eater master, is a Death Eater who falls for their Mudblood slave. Rodolphus would never admit it, but he was in love with her. He had been for a long time. And nothing revolted her more than having to see that yearning look in his eyes every time she was near him.

"I said, remove your hands from me," she repeated slowly and harshly. "This is your last warning."

He smirked and said, "Make me," before pulling her head inward and meeting her lips with his.

In the same swift movement, Hermione bit down hard on his lip while pulling the item out of her trousers.

"Ow!"

Rodolphus stepped back and readied his hand to slap her when he felt something plunge into his stomach. He gasped before slowing looking down, finally removing his hand from her arm to hold it over the bleeding hole in his center. His eyes moved to Hermione's hand, watching as the blood, his blood, dripped off of the small knife she currently held. Then they moved up to her face. Her eyes were flaring as she stared back at him with the fiercest scowl. He had never seen such anger before, or he had chosen not to notice it. Either way, until this moment, part of him truly believed that she cared for him just as much as he cared for her. But he had been wrong. So, so wrong.

"W-why?" he asked in a choked voice as blood continued to pour from his wound.

"I told you to remove your hands from me and you didn't listen. I don't want you touching me. I've never wanted you touching me. And, now, you will *never* touch me again."

With those final words, Hermione lifted her blade and used it to slash open Rodolphus' throat. He grabbed at the wound before falling to the floor, struggling to stay conscious as he bled out.

Hermione watched him until he stopped moving, only then looking down at the bloody knife she held. She didn't think she could do it, take someone's life in such a brutal and cruel fashion, but she had and she hardly felt sorry about it. He was a Death Eater. A murderer. She had probably saved dozens of lives by ridding the world of him, including her own.

"AHH!"

Hermione turned to see Fanin standing in the entrance to the room. The house-elf ran away quickly, dropping the potion he held as he did so.

"No!" shouted Hermione, darting to catch it, but she was too late. The bottle shattered. "Dammit!"

There was no time to stress over it. She quickly ran back to Rodolphus' body and searched it until she came out with his wand. It wouldn't be much use since, when they found out what she had done, they would put a trace on it usage, but it could at least help her get somewhere.

With the wand in hand, Hermione ran over to the closet and threw it open. At first, she was going to grab her own cloak but then she noticed how tattered it was. She would definitely stand out in a crowd while wearing that. So, instead, she grabbed a simple black one and put it on. She reacted a bit when she realized it smelled like her. Rodolphus' wife and the person she hated most in this world. Bellatrix. It was because of her that Hermione became a slave in the first place. Her and the Malfoys. How she loathed them. All of them.

Once the cloak was on, Hermione stuck her knife and the confiscated wand into her pocket. She opened the door and sprinted outside, not stopping until she was off of the property.

Pulling the hood of the cloak over her head, Hermione looked in every direction before walking off into the night, searching for a crowd she could get lost in.

The streetlamps and their enchanted flames shined the way for her like a golden path, giving her hope for the first time in who knows how many years. It was like they were leading her, guiding her towards what she desired most. To be reunited with her friends. With Harry. The Boy Who Still Lived. And Ron. Her sweet, sweet Ron, who probably blamed himself for her disappearance. Hopefully, they had found one another and were still fighting. For her. For everyone. For their future. And for their freedom.

# Chapter 2: I Saw Her Standing There

**A/N: Had a long debate with myself about whether or not to split this chapter, but eventually decided against it. My gift to you.**

**Obviously, in the beginning, Draco and Hermione are not going to be quite themselves, but don't worry. They'll get there ;-)**

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Several nights later, Hermione lingered outside of a pub in a dodgy part of town, trying to stay with a crowd of people. She had originally hid in dark alleys and under bridges when it became late, but then the Death Eaters started searching all of those types of places for her, almost catching her nearly half a dozen times.

A drunken witch suddenly stumbled into her without any sort of apology. Hermione pretended to help her catch her balance while slyly slipping her hand into the girl's pocket and pulling out her wand. Once she had it hidden in her sleeve, she went over to the stone wall of the building and put her back against it, using it to help her slide down to the ground.

While keeping the wand hidden, she used it to cast a small Healing Spell on the bruise that was hurting her the most at the moment, on her left arm. This was all Hermione could do. She was a bit rusty when it came to magic and her mind was too weak to do very strong spells.

She had tried to Apparate when she first escaped but she had not been expecting much. Of course, it did not work, and now her window was gone. She heard people gossiping about how Voldemort had put up an anti-Apparition shield around the city, most likely to keep her from escaping it. He also closed the Floo network and put up check points for people flying on brooms. No one was told why he did these things, which Hermione could only assume was because he did not want Harry catching wind of her escape.

So it seemed, as of right now, Hermione was trapped in the city of London. She didn't know what to do. She had been stealing wands regularly, but could only bring herself to cast one spell on each since the Death Eaters had become somewhat like police officers in the years following the war, and they would consistently check the last traces of magic on every citizen's wand. There was no freedom here anymore. For anyone.

Once the spell was cast, Hermione waited a few moments for it to take effect. As soon as that mild relief washed over her, she stood back up and walked into the crowd, trying hard not to limp and making sure to drop the wand somewhat near

the owner's foot. Then she continued to the curb, where she stood staring mindlessly at the cold, dark street. She needed to come up with a plan but her mind just was not as sharp as it once was. Years of torture could do that to you.

"My wand? Where the hell is my wand?" she heard the girl yell frantically behind her. "Someone has stolen it! SOMEONE HAS STOLEN -"

"Isn't that it right there?" asked someone else.

Hermione turned to see them pointing at the ground. The girl looked at it, blinked, and then chuckled lightly before picking it up.

"Oh, thank Merlin! The Death Eaters would have had my head for sure!"

"We need another round to celebrate!" said a wizard, walking over and putting his arms around her and one of her friends. "On me!"

The witches all laughed before following him back inside the pub. Hermione turned back to face the street and began to think.

"Did you hear the rumors that some Death Eater got his throat slashed open?" said a wizard to two of his mates as they walked up beside Hermione. He took out and lit a pipe.

"Yeah, I heard some Mudblood slave did it. Wouldn't be surprised if we're all watching their execution this weekend," said a wizard with dark hair and a large cleft in his chin.

"No, I don't think so," said the one with the pipe before taking a large puff. "Word is they escaped, which is why the whole bloody city is essentially on lockdown."

"How annoying," said a ginger wizard, rolling his eyes. "I hope they catch the damn Mudblood soon. I hate not being able to just Apparate home."

"Speaking of which, where is that damn Knight Bus?" asked the wizard with the cleft chin.

"Don't think it's supposed to be here for another few minutes." The wizard took another puff from his pipe, only now noticing Hermione standing beside them. He turned to look at her, catching a slight glimpse of her profile. Luckily, this was the less bruised side of her face, so she probably looked fairly normal, albeit a little tired. "Where are you headed?" he asked

"Nowhere," answered Hermione, turning her head so he couldn't get a better look

at her.

Just as she did, someone walked up on the other side of her, wearing a dark-green cloak with the hood covering their face, much like hers. She moved her head back so it was facing forward. As she did so, the stranger lifted a hand and rubbed at their eyes, appearing very weary.

"I can help you fix that," said the wizard with the pipe, grabbing at her wrist.

His hand landed directly on a large bruise and, when he squeezed, it sent a horrible sting up her arm. "Ow!" Hermione screamed automatically. She didn't mean to since he hadn't even grabbed her that hard, but the pain was just too much.

The hooded stranger stopped rubbing their eyes. They stood there, frozen for a moment before glancing sideways at her.

"Shut your trap! I barely touched you!" shouted the wizard, releasing her wrist with such force that she flew back.

Hermione ran right into the stranger with the cloak. She grabbed at them and they caught her just before she hit the ground. The sleeve of their cloak rid up and Hermione got a clear view of the jet black tattoo on their arm. A skull with a snake protruding from its mouth. The Dark Mark. She tried not to gasp and quickly pulled herself off of them. She needed to get out of here now.

Hermione turned to walk away but the wizard with the pipe pulled her back. "Where you going, princess?"

He pulled her into him. Before Hermione even had the chance to try and get away, the Death Eater grabbed the man's arm and shoved him off of her.

"You dare lay your hands on a lady?"

Hermione's heart stopped. Dear Merlin, she knew that voice. She turned her head slightly and tried to get a better look at the man, but he was still well hidden under the hood of his cloak.

"What's it to you?" asked the wizard, reaching for his wand.

The hooded man was quick to pull back his sleeve and show all of them the tattoo on his forearm. The other men gasped.

"S-so sorry, Sir. I … I didn't know you were -"

"Who I am should not affect your treatment of others. I believe you owe this woman an apology."

"S-sorry, Madam."

Hermione said nothing. She turned to walk away again but stopped when she saw Macnair and Goyle Sr. standing in their Death Eater robes just outside of the pub. They seemed to be asking everyone a lot of questions, probably looking for her. Shit.

The hooded Death Eater followed her eyes. He waved at his comrades and shouted, "I'm off duty! Check these men's papers for me, will you?" He pointed at the trio of wizards.

"Send 'em over!" shouted Macnair.

The hooded Death Eater looked back at the men in front of him. "You heard the wizard. Go," he said, motioning his head. "And you better hope your identification papers are legit. Macnair is an expert at catching counterfeits."

"I-it's all good and clear, Sir," said the wizard with the pipe he had long forgotten about. He and his friends nervously headed over to where the two Death Eaters were waiting.

Not even ten seconds after they were gone, a large, triple-decker purple bus zoomed onto the street and stopped in front of them with a loud BANG. Hermione was just about to bolt when she noticed Macnair and Goyle were not just checking those three men's identification papers, they were checking everyone's.

When she turned back towards the bus, the hooded Death Eater motioned with his arm and waited for her to go first. Her heart was racing. If she ran now, she would surely look suspicious, but what other option did she have? Only one.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione stepped forward and climbed onto the Knight Bus, the hooded Death Eater following closely behind her.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus," said a wizard in a bright purple uniform as they entered, "the only transport currently running in the wizarding city of London. Hail Lord Voldemort!" He lifted his fist in tribute. "Step onboard and we can take you anywhere in the city you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike, and I will be your conductor this evening."

Hermione knew the name and she immediately felt pity for the poor wizard, still under the Imperius Curse so long after the war. How long exactly, she still did not

know.

"Five Sickles a ride."

Hermione's eyes widened as she stuck her hands into her pockets, pretending to dig for money she knew was not there. Just the knife and Rodolphus' barely used wand. She had no doubt that the trace on it was put in place days ago. Clearly, this plan was not very well thought out.

"I've got the lady," the Death Eater said behind her, reaching into his own pocket and dropping several gold coins into Stan Shunpike's hand. "And give her a chocolate, as well. She's had a rough night."

"You got it, Sir," said Stan, putting the money away and grabbing a chocolate bar off of a nearby table. He shoved it into Hermione's hands. "Take any free bed you like. We ain' picky considerin' the current lockdown."

Hermione pocketed the chocolate and walked right by Stan, making sure to grab a map of the area out of a brochure holder and heading up the stairs. She climbed until she was on the third floor, very aware of the footsteps just behind her. The Death Eater. Why wouldn't he just leave her alone already?

There were not many people up here, but the few she did see were either passed out drunk or potentially fornicating. At least they had the decency to cover themselves with a blanket so she wasn't quite sure. Even though she really was.

Hermione did not stop walking until she got to the bed in the very back corner of the bus. She lied down so she was facing the wall, trying to ignore the sound of the bed beside her creaking as someone put their weight on it. She gulped. Did he know who she was? Was he playing with her? Just like he always did in school.

Trying to ignore him, Hermione opened the map and took a good look at it. A miniature version of the bus was moving around so she could see exactly where they were and where they were going.

Hermione debated when and where she should get off. Part of her felt like she should exit the Knight Bus as soon as possible, but another part of her wanted to wait until she was closer to a way out of the city. But places like that were, undoubtedly, heavily guarded. Most likely with Dementors.

Of course, right now she was also thinking about the best way to get away from this Death Eater, whose eyes she could feel burrowing into her back. There was no way she could get off before him. What if he followed her? She shivered at the

thought.

Having settled on the plan to wait for the Death Eater to exit before deciding on a stop for herself, Hermione folded the map back up and pocketed it.

Even though the beds on the Knight Bus were not the most comfortable, it still beat sleeping against a stone wall outside in the cold all night, having to make sure to keep one eye open at all times.

Hermione snuggled her head into the pillow and breathed it in. Merlin, that felt good. She hadn't had an owner who gave her an actual bed to sleep in for a long time. Probably since the last time Rodolphus had a hold of her, and that was only when Bellatrix was not around to scold him for it.

Suddenly, the bus came to another halt with a loud BANG, causing the beds on one side to slide and switch with the ones on the other. Hermione didn't like this since she was slightly more exposed this way.

While the bus normally started back up again within a matter of seconds, this time it did not. Hermione held her ear up and listened. The bustling activity going on downstairs stopped just as abruptly as the bus.

"Shit," she heard the Death Eater say under his breath.

"What's going on?" asked a girl's voice. Hermione did not remember seeing any girl's when she came up here so she assumed she must have been one of the people under the squirming blanket.

"I hear'," *hiccup*, "Deaf Ea'ers been checkin' da," *hiccup*, "bus at night. Ter make sure we all gots our … ugh … papers. I needa bucket."

"That'll be three Sickles," said Stan Shunpike's voice appearing out of nowhere.

"I aint gots," *hiccup*, "no mer money."

There was a strange gurgling sound that Hermione did not find pleasant at all.

"For Merlin's sake, just give him the bucket!" shouted the girl.

"Three Sickles," repeated Stan.

"Please … ugh … no … BLEH!"

Even without looking, Hermione was quite sure she knew what had just happened.

"My robes!" shouted a new voice. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"S-so s-s-sorry," said the drunk man in a quivering voice. "I-I didn' mean to -"

"*Crucio!*"

Hermione cringed as the man began to scream, along with several other people.

"Check his fucking papers before I lose it, Nott."

There was some shuffling of papers as a set of footsteps walked slowly down the aisle between the beds. Hermione could hear as the two new Death Eaters grabbed everyone's identification papers harshly, making a few comments along the way, especially to the half-bloods.

"You sure are pretty," said the same Death Eater to a whimpering girl. "Your body already reeks of sex. Did you do it right here in this bed?"

"No," she cried.

"You filthy little Mudblood liar."

"I'm … I'm a half-blood."

"Same fucking thing. Hey, Nott. You're shifts done after this, isn't it?"

"Yeah," said a voice that was clearly the younger Nott, Theo.

"Maybe you'd like to take this lovely piece home with you?"

"I'd rather not. The last time I brought a half-blood home, my father *Crucio'd* her to near death. Needless to say, she hasn't been over since."

"You're … you're kidding, right?" asked the girl.

"I wish I was," said Theo with a chuckle. "She's all yours."

"Excellent," said the other Death Eater. "Clean yourself up, Mudblood. I don't want any traces of some other man on you while I'm shagging you tonight."

"You not even going to fight for her?" asked Theo to who Hermione could only assume was the guy she was with.

"I … we … I mean … I only met her an hour ago."

"Looks like I got myself a real class act tonight." The Death Eater laughed.

Footsteps continued down the aisle. Hermione closed her eyes and moved her face further into her hood, trying her best to fight off a whimper.

"Evening, Rabastan."

Hermione shuddered as the Death Eater in the bed beside her said the name. She knew it well. Rabastan Lestrange, brother to Rodolphus and an adamant hater of Hermione. He could not stand the way his brother was when she was around, so he tortured her whenever he got the chance. He said she made Rodolphus weak. It seemed that he was right. If he wasn't weak then he might still be alive.

"What are you doing here?"

"Just trying to get home. A process you are currently delaying. Could you move this along, already?"

There was silence, followed by another footstep. Hermione clenched to sheets to stop herself from shuddering.

"I would prefer it if you did not wake her."

"Why? She with you?"

"Yes, she is, and she was a little drunker than I prefer my women when we left the pub, so I was hoping to sober her up a bit. I don't want to end up with a sloppy shag tonight."

Hermione knew she had stopped breathing but she could not bring herself to start again. Did he really just lie for her? She kept her eyes tightly shut.

"You get a look at her papers?"

"Yes, because I *always* ask a girl to see her identification papers before buying her a drink."

"Don't get smart with me, you little -"

"Watch your tone! You forget that I am your superior now."

Rabastan went silent immediately.

"She is not who you're looking for, so get the hell out of here and let me get bloody

on with it!"

There were several more creaks on the floor as Rabastan stepped backwards.

"I was so sorry to hear about your brother, by the way."

Rabastan stopped moving.

"Of course, my Aunt Bella is another story. She says her lousy husband deserved it, considering his obsession with that Mudblood. Didn't keep a good enough eye on her."

"Fuck you -"

"Ah! Language!"

Hermione's hand clenched the sheets tighter. She hated that he was prolonging this. Just let them leave already.

"I oughtta -"

"You *ought to* what?"

Rabastan said nothing.

"That's what I thought. Get out of here, Rabastan. I'm tired and I would like to get home."

"Fucking prick," Rabastan said under his breath as he walked back down the aisle between the beds. "Just like his father."

"And Rabastan!" the Death Eater called after his subordinate had gotten a fair distance away. "Leave the girl, will you? I suddenly have a craving for a little ménage à trois action tonight."

"Bloody fucking bastard," Rabastan muttered as he descended the stairs.

Theo laughed from across the room.

"Drinks later this week, Nott?"

"Sure. I'll send you an owl," said Theo before following Rabastan down the stairs.

As soon as it was clear they were gone, the Death Eater said to the whimpering girl, "I suggest you get home quickly. And don't go out again at night anytime soon.

If he sees you, he'll undoubtedly try again."

"Yes. Thank you," she cried.

There was a thunderous BANG when the bus started up again, sending the beds sliding back to their original locations.

As the bus continued to move, Hermione lay there baffled by what had just happened. Somehow, she had been saved. By *him*.

After taking a deep breath, Hermione turned in the bed so she was facing the Death Eater. She kept her head down for a long moment before finally lifting it slowly, first taking in his feet planted firmly on the ground, then his knees, his chest, his shoulders, his neck, and finally his face, no longer hidden beneath the safety of a hood. It was a face she had not seen in years but would, undoubtedly, never forget. A face she had never wanted to see again. The face of Draco Malfoy.

He stared back at her with his stone-cold gray eyes. Both were hidden behind two incredibly dark circles that only made his already creamy complexion look even paler. The years had not been kind to him. There was a good chance that his exhaustion even rivaled her own. It looked like he had not slept in months, maybe longer.

Draco only held Hermione's gaze for a moment longer before he lifted his hand and motioned for her to turn around. The old her would have fought him on such an order, but the present her knew he was right. She was not in the clear yet. Someone could still recognize her. She turned back around and closed her eyes, silently wondering what the hell was going to happen next.

Hermione must have drifted off to sleep, because she shot up with a fright when someone grabbed onto her shoulder.

"Our stop is coming up," said Draco, fixing her hood that had fallen halfway off.

She stared at him blankly.

Draco leaned into her and whispered, "Everyone here heard me say you were getting off with me, so I suggest you do just that before you risk both of our lives."

Hermione looked around the bus and saw that everyone was watching them, including the other girl who was trying to get a good look at whomever it was she would not be having a ménage à trois with tonight.

Hermione nodded and stood. She flinched as Draco grabbed her hand, but he kept a firm grip on it as he started pulling her towards the stairs.

While taking a good look down at their clasped hands, Hermione felt absolutely sick. Filthy and starved, holding hands with Draco Malfoy, *forced* to rely on the help of a Death Eater. It really did not get any lower than this. And that was saying a lot, coming from her. She had been pretty close to the bottom before but at least she always somewhat had her dignity. Now she didn't even have that.

Hermione kept her head low as they walked, making sure not to make eye contact with anyone.

Draco led her down both flights of stairs and then through the chaos of the first floor of the bus. He stopped by the exit and firmly gripped a pole, pulling her into him and holding her tightly as the bus came to one final and abrupt halt. BANG!

The doors opened and Stan tried to shout his closing speech to them as Draco took hold of her hand again and hurried her outside. The doors closed behind them and the Knight Bus zoomed off. As soon as it was out of sight, Draco dropped Hermione's hand and the two of them were left standing outside in the damp, cold air.

Where were they? She looked around to see that they were in an old Muggle neighborhood. It seemed pretty dead around here. Not only were there no people walking around, but every building was pitch black.

Without a word, Draco turned and started walking to what Hermione recognized as the east, thanks to the stars she could see clearer than she should have when in the middle of a city. They were her only aid since she currently could not use magic.

After Draco had taken a few steps, he stopped and turned. "You coming?" he asked.

Hermione's eyes widened. Was he insane? Of course she wasn't coming, and she made that very clear by rapidly shaking her head.

"It's not safe for you to stay out here."

Hermione crossed her arms and remained silent.

"If I wanted to turn you in, don't you think I would have done it already?"

That was a very curious question. If he had been any other person then she would

have said yes, but this … this was Draco Malfoy. Someone history had taught her never to trust. And for good reason. Why should now be any different?

"Look, I understand why you don't trust me."

At least they were on the same page.

"I never gave you much reason to in school and the mark on my arm doesn't exactly help. But, if you stay out here, you *will* be caught and you *will* be executed. They have a plan to capture you and, without someone's help, they will undoubtedly succeed."

Even though Hermione was starting to feel far less confident, she still stood up straight and held her ground. This was *Draco Malfoy*. The boy she had pleaded with to save her before being forced into the life she was now trying to escape. She could never forget that.

"Fine. Suit yourself," he spat. "It's your bloody funeral."

And with those final, heartfelt words, Draco turned and left. Hermione watched him walk further and further down the street, his figure becoming hazy in the fog. Her eyes did not leave him until he rounded the corner.

When she was left alone, Hermione moved so she was out of the streetlamps. She turned to walk in the opposite direction as him, but quickly looked back at the corner he had just gone around.

Hermione had never been much of a gambler but, given the current circumstances, every move she made was just that. A gamble. Right now, she had no plan. She knew no one in this city - other than her former slave owners - and had absolutely nowhere to go. Sleeping on the streets was a great risk and she could hang around the crowds all she wanted, that didn't change the fact that, eventually, someone was going to recognize her. After all, Draco did.

Past prejudices aside, at that moment, Draco had given her no reason not to trust him. He protected her from the pricks outside of the pub, paid for her to get onto the Knight Bus, lied for her so she would not get caught by the other Death Eaters, and bought her chocolate.

Hermione reached into her pocket and touched the candy she had placed there. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. She had taken a great gamble when she actually used that knife and now she was going to do it again.

Without taking a moment to talk herself out of it, Hermione opened her eyes and took off running in the direction Draco had gone. Her body ached as she moved and a pain she had almost forgotten about shot through her ankle, but she didn't care. She had to catch up to him. Whether he betrayed her or not, he was still her best option. So, for the first time since she'd known him, Hermione Granger was taking a chance on Draco Malfoy.

She whirled around the corner and stopped to look around. He wasn't here. She had already lost him. Merlin, what was she going to -

"About bloody time you got here."

Hermione's heart jumped as she looked to see Draco leaning up against the wall. He smirked.

"You didn't actually think I was going to leave you alone out here, did you?"

Hermione said nothing.

"Do you never bloody talk anymore?" he asked, standing up straight. "Back in school, the trick was getting you to shut up. Where are your snide remarks? Your derogatory comments? Where's your bloody fucking fire?"

Hermione stared at him coldly, letting out a large puff of breath before saying, "It's back at Hogwarts, probably in that same corridor we were in before your father dragged me away to a life of slavery."

Draco stared back at her, mouth slightly agape. But it was not long before his look of surprise melted away, and became a wide grin instead. "Ah! Now there's the witch I have come to know and loathe. Looks like I just have to rattle you a bit. Well, come along then."

Draco led the way and, together, they walked through the dead streets of what was formerly Muggle London, but now nothing more than the haunting remnants of a ghost town. Hermione looked around at the eerie sight, unsure of how she was supposed to feel in that moment. Even though she had been in London many times since the war, she had always been isolated in a house. Other than her glimpses out the window during the carriage rides, she had never seen how sad the once thriving city had truly become.

Draco walked at a hurried pace and Hermione had a hard time keeping up with him. Her ankle was really starting to hurt and she found herself wishing she had spent more time healing it instead of the random bruises that had been bothering

her most at the time.

After several twists and turns through the streets, they eventually stopped in front of a large flat complex. Draco used his wand and then a Muggle key to let them inside. As they walked up the stairs, Hermione could hear loud music and voices coming from one of the higher floors. She pulled her hood on further.

"'OI! Malfoy!" a man's voice shouted as they continued past the third floor.

Draco put his hand on Hermione's waist and guided her up a few steps higher than him - trying to ignore the way she flinched - before turning towards whoever called him.

"Picked these up for you."

Hermione watched them toss him something out of the corner of her eye.

"Thanks," said Draco as he pocketed the item.

"Come on, mate. You gotta tell us," said another wizard, walking over to them and taking a large swig out of a bottle of firewhiskey. "How much longer we gotta put up with this damn lockdown?"

"Yeah. You Death Eater blokes caught whoever it is you're looking for yet?"

"You know I cannot share that information."

"Ah, come on! What's the point of having a Death Eater as a neighbor if you can't bloody tell us anything?"

"Favors." Draco smirked. "All I can say is that the lockdown won't be ending anytime soon. Actually, starting tomorrow, it is going to be worse. You will receive a formal notice in the morning."

"AWW!" both men whined with great disappointment.

The first one took a puff of what appeared to be a Muggle cigarette and glanced up at Hermione. She quickly turned away. "Who *is* your lovely lady friend?"

"None of your bloody business."

"Shier than the ones you normally bring around. What's your name, sweetheart?"

Draco grabbed the bottle out of the second man's hands and said, "I'll be taking

this. And I suggest you keep it loud down here tonight, less you want to hear something your small, feeble minds might not understand."

Both wizards gaped at him and then at Hermione. They grinned.

"It's always the quiet ones who are screamers." The man with the cigarette laughed.

Hermione whipped in their direction. "I beg your pardon!"

"We should be going now." Draco grabbed her arm and yanked her further up the stairs. "Hold your bloody tongue, will you?" he whispered harshly once they were a fair enough distance away.

Draco did not stop pulling her until they reached the very top, which was the fifth floor. There was only one door here and he waved his wand at it before unlocking it with another Muggle key. He stepped inside and used his wand to turn on the lights. Then he waited for Hermione to come in, but she made no signs of leaving the dimly lit hallway.

"You already came this bloody far. Seems a bit foolish to stop now," he said, wiggling the door like he was going to shut it.

Hermione looked at him with skepticism. But then she took a deep, meditative breath and slowly stepped inside. After all, it was all part of the gamble, right?

She jumped as Draco shut the door behind her. Without a word, he took off his cloak and tossed it over the back of a chair, leaving her standing there as he headed for the kitchen.

Hermione stood frozen as he shuffled around in there, her eyes studying every last inch of the flat Draco Malfoy dwelled in. It was much smaller than she expected. Not that it was small by any means, but it was definitely no Malfoy Manor.

The living space was fairly well-sized, with a soft, black sofa, two Slytherin-green armchairs - typical - a coffee table, a mahogany desk and chair, a fireplace, which had obviously been expanded to accommodate the Floo network, and a nook with a built-in bookcase that had more knickknacks on it than books, much to her displeasure.

There was a small dining area with a hardwood table and four chairs setup just beside the kitchen. This was originally a Muggle building, so the kitchen had all of the essentials; a four burner stove atop an oven, a refrigerator and even a dishwasher. But, with magic, the latter was hardly necessary.

There were three wooden doors in this flat, all were closed, and there was another large, sliding glass one that led out to a balcony just to the left of the fireplace. The curtains were currently drawn open. Hermione moved to close them.

"Shoes," she heard Draco call from the kitchen.

She stopped and looked back to see that he had taken his off by the door. She did the same, frowning as she looked down at the rundown boots she had been forced to wear for who knows how long next to his shiny black ones.

Letting out another sigh, she walked over to the curtains and took one last peek out at the abandoned city before shutting it away.

"You can take off your cloak, you know. I am fully aware of who you are, Granger."

Hermione tensed at the sound of her name. It had been a long time since anyone had called her anything other than Mudblood. It was nice to hear it again, even from the sharp lips of Draco Malfoy.

Hermione decided it would be all right to pull off her hood but she didn't want him to see the beaten remains of her body just yet. Or maybe she didn't want to see them herself. It was hard to say.

Once her hood was off, Hermione turned and walked across the plushy white carpet towards Draco. A mouthwatering aroma was currently lingering in the air, and she really hoped that whatever he was making was meant for her and not just some midnight snack.

Draco looked up as she approached him, his sucking in his breath a little when he saw the bruises marking her face. Hermione halted and instinctually reached back for her hood, her arms aching as she did so.

"Don't," he said, holding up a hand to stop her. "I didn't mean to do that."

She stopped and lowered her arms to her sides, uncomfortably playing with the pockets on her cloak as she moved her eyes to the floor.

"When was the last time you've eaten?" asked Draco as he waved his wand at a pot on the stove. The burner didn't even turn on but she could hear whatever was inside of it boiling.

Hermione had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. It was so typical that he had all of this Muggle technology around meant to make life easier, yet he still used magic. Of course, she couldn't completely blame him for it. He probably had no

idea how to even turn on the stove. Maybe the gas and electricity weren't even working in this building anymore.

"I don't know," she said with a weak shrug. "How long has it been since I …" What? Murdered someone? Slashed their throat open? "Escaped?" It was really the best word she could come up with.

"Three days," he said before opening a cabinet and pulling out a bowl.

"Then it's been four days. Maybe longer," she answered, remembering that her last owner had starved her for at least twenty-four hours before stuffing her onto that carriage.

Draco let out a deep sigh that made her cringe. She hated pity. Especially from him.

"Sit down, Granger."

Every bit of Hermione that was still left inside of her told her to protest. She did not like being ordered around by him, but the sharp pang in her ankle outweighed her stubbornness and she took a seat at the table.

Not even a minute later, Draco put a bowl of chicken soup and a glass of water in front of her before taking a seat on the other side of the table and drinking straight from the bottle of firewhiskey he had confiscated.

"You should eat slowly," he instructed. "Your stomach needs time to adjust. If this is too heavy I also have fruit or -"

"This is fine," she said, taking several sips of the water before picking up the spoon he had given her and digging in. Merlin, it tasted good. Maybe it was the starvation talking but never in her life had she tasted something so delicious, so intoxicating, so … bloody good before!

When she was about halfway through, Draco stood up and walked through one of the closed doors. He returned several minutes later, holding a bundle of clothes.

Draco waited for her to finish the last few bites of her soup before saying, "I'm not going to lie, Granger. You reek of something putrid."

Hermione wished she could be offended, but she knew he was right.

"Shower's through there." He pointed at one of the doors. "You can put these on after."

Draco put the bundle of clothes on the table before reaching for the bottle and taking another swig. Hermione looked at the clothes blankly for a moment before shuffling through them to see what he had given her; an oversized shirt, some silky green pajama bottoms and …

"Ew!" she screamed as she quickly dropped the lacy, red knickers she had accidentally touched.

"What?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders.

Hermione looked up at him and raised her eyebrows.

"Sometimes, girls leave things behind when they come here."

She raised them higher.

"It's not like they're dirty. I've washed them since."

And higher still.

"Look, it's all I have so it's either them or nothing."

Hermione looked down at the red lace and huffed. While she was absolutely disgusted with the idea of wearing some random slag's knickers, she also did not want to go commando while wearing Draco Malfoy's pajama bottoms. So she caved, picked up the knickers and clothes, and walked to the washroom, shutting the door behind her.

After turning on the shower, Hermione began to carefully undress. She was glad the cloak had a fastener in the front because her body was aching too much to lift anything over her head right now.

She draped the cloak over the closed toilet seat and began stripping her body of the tattered top and trousers she wore, discarding them in the wastebasket and hoping to never have to see them again. It was the same clothes she had been wearing during the Battle of Hogwarts and practically every day since. So much had happened to her in those clothes and she loathed them for being present during the darkest years of her life. She would destroy them right then and there if she had the means to do so.

Before stepping into the shower, Hermione stared for a long moment at the mirror. She didn't want to look into it but she knew she had to. To finally see the damage that had been done to her.

Hermione took several deep breaths before walking in front of the mirror and slowly turning to face it. She gasped as she caught sight of herself, all of herself, for the first time in years. There was no meat left on her. She never had much but now she was nothing but a pale, withered mass of skin and bones. Her entire body was covered in bruises that would fade and scars that would not. She looked at her reflection and traced each one of them, trying to remember how they came to be. Her eyes began to tear and she quickly sucked them back before focusing on her face.

While Hermione had never been a great beauty, she knew she was not an unattractive girl during her years at school, but the witch looking back at her now was hardly recognizable. Her hair was tangled in a filthy heap at the top of her head and her face was dirty and bruised, slight traces of dried blood still marked the spot where she had been hit just before being shuffled onto the carriage. Her eyes that had once been so bright and optimistic were now dull and lifeless, hardly visible under two dark circles that might as well have been made by punches. Even her expression was weary and aged.

Hermione quickly shut her eyes and turned away from the mirror. She tore at the rubber band in her hair, struggling with it so aggressively that she pulled some strands out by the roots before tossing the item next to her clothes in the wastebasket.

Hermione opened the shower door and let the warm water rain down on her frozen body. She was determined not to let this defeat her. Slavery was in her past now. She was free and she couldn't let the memory of it all defeat her. But it was hard not to be defeated when there were still so many reminders of that life all over her.

Taking the bar of soap in her hands, Hermione began lathering every inch of herself, determined to get any remnants of those memories that were removable off of her. Every muscle in her body ached as she did this, but she worked through it. She had to wash all of those horrible memories away. She had to be clean again.

Once she was satisfied enough with her body, Hermione moved on to the horrible mass of her hair. She put some shampoo into her hands and rubbed them together before lifting her arms and … stopping. She couldn't do it. She couldn't lift her arms high enough to wash all of her hair.

"No," Hermione cried, finally feeling defeated as she lowered her hands and let the water wash the shampoo off of them.

She tried lifting her arms again, without a reason this time, but was met with that

same earthshattering pain as before. Turning her head, she attempted to look at how bruised they were but it was impossible to see at this angle.

Hermione continued to cry as her body actually resisted her attempt to forget. She did not know how long she was in there, but it must have been a great deal of time since Draco began banging on the door.

"Dammit, Granger, what the hell is taking so long?" he shouted before throwing it open.

"Go away!" she yelled from inside the shower.

"You forget that this is my bloody flat," he said, walking over to the steamy shower door and opening it.

"What the hell are you doing?" she screamed, not even noticing that his eyes were closed as she moved to smack him.

"Ow! FUCK!" he shouted, gripping at his face.

"How dare you!" Hermione hit him again before grabbing the towel he had in his hands and throwing it over herself.

"I wasn't fucking looking, Granger!" Draco grabbed her wrist to stop her from hitting him again.

"Let go! LET ME THE FUCK GO!" she screamed, going absolutely frantic.

"Merlin, woman! Calm down!" he shouted, releasing her wrist and letting her step backwards.

Hermione did not stop until she hit the shower wall, and then she used it to sink down to the tiled floor, not even caring that the towel she still clutched around her was getting soaked. She cried into her knees as Draco continued to gape at her, unsure of what had just happened.

"Why aren't you clean yet?" he asked after several uncomfortable moments had passed.

"I …" Hermione sobbed. "I can't do it," she finally said.

"Can't do what?"

"I can't … raise my arms to wash my hair. I don't know if they're bruised or … or

more. What if I can never raise them again?"

Draco looked down at her battered body and sighed. "Let me see," he said.

Hermione hesitated for a moment before slightly lifting her arm. Draco took a cautious step into the shower and looked.

"It is bruised pretty badly. Like someone gripped you there."

"They probably did," she said with a sniffle.

Without a word, Draco walked away from the shower and over to the bathtub. He started running the water in it, then proceeded to roll up the sleeves on his jumper, followed by the legs on his trousers.

"What are you doing?" asked Hermione, who had stood up and was now watching him from the doorway of the shower.

"Helping you," he said. "Now, get in the tub."

Hermione eyed him questioningly.

"Fine. I'll go first." Draco walked over to the tub, sat in the edge of it and dipped his feet in. "Eyes are closed, Granger. Now, grab the shampoo and conditioner, take off the towel and get in here."

Hermione didn't move.

"I promise I won't look. Now, get the bloody hell over here."

With another horrible shot to her pride, Hermione walked back into the shower and turned off the water. She grabbed the shampoo and conditioner, and put them beside the tub before dropping her towel and carefully stepping inside.

She sank down into the water and settled herself against his legs before saying, "Okay."

Draco opened his eyes again and reached for the shampoo. He squirted some onto his hands and carefully began lathering it into her dirty tangles.

Hermione tried to keep herself together as he proceeded to wash her but everything that had happened that night was just too much to process. Draco Malfoy had saved her. And, what more, he was actually helping her bathe. And decently. Not once had a hand or an eye drifted. She made sure by watching him

in the mirror.

As Draco took his wand to rinse out her hair, Hermione brought her knees up to her chest and put her face into them, trying hard to hide her tears. But Draco was no fool.

"Granger," he said softly, putting a careful hand on her shoulder. "You're … you're safe here. I promise. There is really no reason to cry."

"How long?" The words came out muffled as she spoke into her knees.

"What?"

Hermione moved her head so it was facing sideways and repeated, "How long? How long has it been since … since the war?" Never before had she cared so much about the answer to that question.

"Four years," Draco said softly while squirting some conditioner into his hands. "Four years, four months and, it's after midnight, so seventeen days."

"It's September nineteenth?" she asked, wondering if she had counted correctly.

"Yes."

"My … my birthday."

Draco froze. "Oh. I … I didn't know."

"Four years," she repeated. "Gone. And I hardly even felt them."

When Draco was finished washing Hermione's hair, he *Accio'd* over a comb and used it to remove all of her tangles. Once that was done, he got out of the tub and levitated a clean towel between them before putting his hands beneath it and helping her get back to her feet. He realized that the shirt he had given her would be impossible for her to put on herself, so he carefully helped her maneuver into it while using magic to keep the towel hovering over her.

After the shirt was on, he pulled out a spare toothbrush and let her have a moment of peace.

Hermione took a long and much needed breather in there by herself. She felt rather embarrassed by this whole ordeal and her stomach was twisted into horrible knots. She did not understand why she was here, or why Draco, a Death Eater, was helping her. If Voldemort ever found out about this, he would not hesitate to

kill him on the spot.

As soon as she felt somewhat composed, Hermione opened the door and walked back out to the main room. Draco was nowhere to be seen, but she followed a shaft of light into the door she had not seen him enter yet. Inside, he was currently pulling back the sheets in a simple but comfortable looking bed.

"This is my guestroom," he said without looking up. "You can sleep here. I don't know for how long, but the uh … the Dark Lord is setting a curfew starting tomorrow. There is still a taboo on his name so don't say it. Ever."

He stared over at her and she gave him a nod of understanding.

Draco looked back at his task. "From now on, anyone who is not in a registered residence between the hours of midnight and four a.m. will be revealed. I don't know how yet, but they will and it's best if you're not outside for that. I am sure I do not have to explain why."

"How … how long do you think he'll be looking for me?" she asked, eager to get out of this city and find her way back to Harry and Ron.

"It's hard to say. After a couple of nights of this curfew, he might just assume you escaped the city somehow. But he also might not."

"And I can stay here? Throughout this … curfew?"

Draco nodded. "And longer. If you need to." He looked up again and locked eyes with her. "Get in. You look exhausted."

As much as Hermione hated the way he kept ordering her around, she simply did not have it in her to fight with him over it. So she obediently walked over to the bed and lied down. Even though she did not need him to, he pulled the covers over her and somewhat tucked her in. He looked as confused by the gesture as she did.

"Malfoy … why are you doing this?" she asked weakly as she continued to gaze up at him.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "But when I knew it was you on that curb, I couldn't just bloody leave you there."

"So you saw me?"

"No. I recognized your voice when you cried out as that man grabbed you. The last time I saw you, my father cast a spell that knocked you over. Your voice then

sounded just the same."

"Any normal Death Eater would have turned me in."

"I know," he said. "But I stopped being a normal Death Eater four years, four months and -"

"Seventeen days ago?" she finished.

Draco nodded. "That's right. The day I watched my aunt kill my mother for doing nothing more than trying to protect me. I do what I have to to stay alive, Granger. That is all."

"Some might call that cowardly," she said before turning her back on him. "You can go now. I'm tired."

Draco looked down at the soft traces of her figure in the blankets and sighed. He wanted to defend himself, but he simply did not have it in him to fight with her over it. So he left, using his wand to turn out the lights and softly closing the door, silently wondering what the hell he was going to do with his new houseguest.

When he got into his own bedroom, he leaned against the closed door and quietly said to himself, "I'm fucked."

# Chapter 3: Let It Be

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Hermione awoke the next morning to complete and total silence. She had not slept very well, considering she still had to do the one eye open thing, and both her head and body ached horribly.

Glancing around the room, she found that there was no clock in here and since she had absolutely no concept of time anymore, she had no idea how early or late it actually was. She supposed it really made no difference. Whether she had been in here for eight minutes or eight hours, her sleep was still as restless and unfulfilling as ever.

Through a small crack in the green curtains, she could at least see that it was light out.

Hermione struggled to lift her aching body to a seated position and carefully placed both feet flat on the floor. With the covers torn off of her, she took a good look down at the silky pajama bottoms she was wearing and began stroking the material. She didn't like it. It was rather cold this morning and silk wasn't very forgiving when it came to weather. Something flannel really would have been more appropriate. Of course, she was in no position to complain.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione stood up, having to take a moment before being able to straighten her body entirely. All of the thrashing she had done to him last night in the shower really had not helped her aching body.

Hermione went over to the window and pulled the curtains aside. It was a bit gloomy outside but, overall, seemed like a fairly nice day. The first signs of autumn were beginning to show and she was happy her view had a few trees in it so she could watch the leaves change. Of course, she would be happier if she did not have to stay here long enough to see it happen, but she had a pretty good feeling that at least a few weeks here was not so farfetched. If she was going to get out of the city, she needed to have done it within minutes of her escape, and she simply did not have the strength for that. So, for now, she would have to wait.

Getting down on her knees, Hermione crossed her arms on the windowsill and used them to brace her chin as she continued to gaze outside. It was still her birthday, and she supposed being alive after a Death Eater discovered her was a gift in itself. It was most certainly all she was going to get.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione stood back up. She shivered from the cold and began looking around for her cloak. Then she remembered that she had left it in the washroom.

With as quiet a stride as she could manage with her hurt ankle, Hermione went to the door and carefully opened it. She poked her head into the dark living room and began searching around for a light switch, eventually finding it all the way near the front door. It was a great surprise when the switch actually worked and a bright light flooded into the room.

Glancing around, she noticed that Draco's shoes were no longer by the door and his cloak was no longer draped over the chair. But hers was. She picked it up and fastened it on, hugging it to her like a blanket in an attempt to keep warm. The pocket felt heavy and it was then that she remembered the items she carried. Her hand traveled inside of it and came out with a knife, a map of London, and a chocolate bar. That was it? She looked again. No, her pockets were definitely empty.

Suddenly, the lock on the door clicked and Hermione looked around in a panic. As a last resort, she darted behind the sofa and ducked the moment the door opened.

"Too slow," she heard the drawling voice of Draco say.

After letting out a sigh of relief, she stood back up straight.

Draco took in her cloak and cocked an eyebrow. "Going somewhere?"

"I … I was cold," she said, fidgeting with the items in her hand.

"Did it ever cross your mind that instead of trying to hide, perhaps you should have raised that knife you're holding?"

Hermione looked down at the knife and stared at it curiously. "No," she said honestly.

"Is that the knife that did the damage?" asked Draco, walking over and putting the satchel he was carrying down on the closest armchair, before taking the knife from her reluctant hands. He inspected it closely. "I must admit, Granger, I was a bit shocked when I heard about what you did to Rodolphus. I really didn't think you had it in you." He smirked somewhat proudly before slipping the knife back into her pocket. "You should make sure to keep that close."

"I … where is my wand?"

Raising his eyebrows, Draco asked, "You mean Rodolphus' wand?"

She nodded.

"I took it. That thing is too dangerous to have just lying around. I am assuming you are aware of the trace on it or else you would have used it more."

She nodded again. "I kept it for emergencies."

"Well, if an emergency arises then I will tell you where it is." Draco picked up his satchel again and began walking towards the kitchen. "Follow me."

Hermione's nostrils flared as he ordered her around again. It was getting bloody annoying but she wasn't sure if she really had the right to protest. So she followed.

Draco put the satchel down on the counter and pulled out two bottles of a bright-green liquid. "This is a Healing Potion," he explained as he went into one of the drawers and pulled out a spoon. "You take exactly one spoonful of it every twelve hours. No more, no less. Got it?"

Hermione nodded and watched closely as he poured the liquid into the spoon for her. He handed it off and she drank it down quickly. Minty.

Draco reached into his satchel again and, this time, came out with a small clock.

"This is for your room. I know I don't have one in there and there will be certain days when I am going to require that you don't wander around out here. Take a good look at the time now so you remember when to take your potion."

She did just that. "Is the time right?" she asked, noticing it was only half past six.

"Yes."

"You've already been up and about at this hour?"

"I don't sleep much," he said before reaching into his satchel again and pulling out a small glass container holding a blue paste. "Rub this on your bruises. It will help them heal at a faster rate."

Hermione took the container and frowned. "Malfoy, I know as a slave I probably am not the most informed person in this city, but aren't items like this and the Healing Potion forbidden?"

"They are."

"Then how did you get them? Do Death Eaters supersede the rules or something?"

"They do when they know where the Black Market is."

Hermione was taken aback. "The Black Market?" she repeated. "I thought that was just a myth."

"No, it very much exists. It has always existed but, after the war, members of the resistance took it over. Some Death Eaters have been searching for it for years, trying to shut it down, but others of us, the majority, simply use it to our advantage."

"Where is it?" she asked curiously.

Draco let out a loud chortle. "You must be daft if you really believe I would tell you something like that."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Because, Granger. I know how you are. In danger or not, if you knew where the Black Market was, you would undoubtedly try to go there. It is too dangerous. Especially for a wanted witch."

"What's safe for you is safe for me."

"In this city, the mark on my arm says otherwise."

"If you're such a great Death Eater then why the hell do you live in a Muggle building?"

"The Dark Lord wanted one of us inhabiting every corner of the city and this corner had no wizarding streets." Draco stuck his hand back into the satchel and began feeling around for something. "Besides, I like this building. Other than the noisy pricks you saw downstairs, it is completely empty." He came out holding a small, blue box and put it in front of her.

Hermione eyed the box inquisitively. "What's that?"

"This may be a bit of a shock but, if you open it, you just might find out."

Hermione rolled her eyes. After all of these years, he was still such an aggravating smartass. She reached out and carefully opened the box, her eyes widening as they settled on the item inside. It was a cupcake. A delicious looking, chocolate frosted cupcake with rainbow sprinkles.

"I wasn't sure about Muggle traditions but, in the wizarding world, it is customary to have cake on your birthday."

Without waiting for a reaction, Draco picked up his satchel and carried it into his own room. When he came out a few minutes later, Hermione was still standing there, staring blankly at the cupcake he had given her.

He smirked and walked over to her, putting a hand on her shoulder to get her attention. "Here," he said, handing her a black jumper. "So you don't have to wear that heavy cloak all day."

She took it absentmindedly.

"And these are for your feet," he said, putting a pair of slippers on the floor.

Hermione watched closely as he carefully placed them so they would be easy for her to step right into. She stared at them for a moment, and then at the jumper in her hands. And then back at that bloody cupcake. After darting her eyes several times between the three objects, she finally settled on Draco, giving him her first good look since she had turned towards him on the bus.

He was the same. Platinum blonde hair, stone-gray eyes, creamy white skin, strong, pointed features. Slightly older, slightly darkened by the effects of war, but the same. If he was the same on the outside then how the hell could anything else about him be different? No. This was just too bloody weird and she felt like she was going to burst. Her mind simply could not take it anymore.

"No, no, no!" she said, throwing the jumper back at him. "Stop it! Stop doing that!"

"Doing what?" asked Draco, furrowing his brows as he looked back at her.

"Being like this!" She motioned at him dramatically with her hands. "Like … like your bloody fucking nice or something! It's creeping me out!"

"Me being nice is creeping you out?"

"Yes! Because you're not nice, Malfoy! You're mean and spiteful! And you're a Death Eater! Your father and aunt are the reason I have been held prisoner and tortured for *four* years! FOUR FUCKING YEARS!"

"Yes, I realize that," he said calmly.

"If you wanted to help me then you should have done it then! You should have lifted your wand and stopped them!"

"I was young. And my mother had just been killed in front of me. I didn't know -"

"I don't care!" she screamed, crying freely. "Do you know what they did to me? What your Uncle Rodolphus did to me every day I was imprisoned in his home?"

"Yes," Draco answered with a straight mouth. "I am aware of what happens to slaves, and Rodolphus was hardly quiet about his delusional conquest over you."

This only made Hermione cry harder. "He never had me! Despite what he thought, he never, *ever* had me!"

"I know. That is why I said 'delusional'."

"I can't stay here, Malfoy," she said, calming slightly. "I haven't even been here twelve hours yet and I can already feel the walls closing in on me. I can't be trapped again. Not by you. Not by another Death Eater."

Until that moment, Draco had been holding it together. But hearing her say those words set something off inside of him. A fire he had not felt in years. He was trying to help her. Genuinely trying to help her and she actually had the audacity to compare him to those … those revolting, torturing rapists!

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" he asked as his eyes narrowed into a cold stare. "Trapping you? Like *they* trapped you?"

Hermione said nothing but continued to look at him firmly.

"Believe me, Granger, I don't want you here anymore than you want to be here!"

"Yet here we are," she said, using her hands to wipe at her damp cheeks.

"Yes, and that is the way it has to stay. You and me. Here. You understand?"

Hermione creased her brow and pursed her lips, studying him carefully as he finally let that coolness he had been trying to maintain go. "Why am I here, Malfoy?"

"Not to be my bloody slave!" Draco crossed his arms. "I am actually quite certain that I am the one who has been doing things for *you*!"

Hermione opened her mouth to say something but he beat her to it.

"I fucking bathed you! A Mudblood! In *my* washroom! Where's the fucking gratitude? I mean, honestly, how many more times do I have to help you before I get a bloody thank you?"

Hermione straightened herself up and mirrored him by crossing her own arms in front of her chest. She looked him square in the eye, her mouth lowering in a deep scowl, and said, "At least once more."

With a final, mocking wink, Hermione pushed past him and marched with a slight limp towards the guestroom.

"And don't call me a Mudblood!" she shouted before slamming the door behind her.

"Fuck you!" With a frustrated growl, Draco tossed the jumper at her door and kicked the slippers across the room. What an ungrateful bitch!

Merlin, she infuriated him! Just as much now as she did when they were in school.

After feeling to make sure his keys were in his pocket, he shouted, "I'm going out!" at the closed door. He then proceeded to storm out of the flat, making sure to slam the front door twice as loud as she did.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Several hours later, Hermione was awoken by the sound of her stomach growling. She wasn't sure when she had fallen asleep, but it couldn't have been long ago since her head still throbbed terribly. It felt like it had been split in two.

She rubbed at her swollen eyes and sat up in the bed. From the crack in the curtains, she could tell that the sun was already setting. Draco had not come back yet.

With a deep sigh, Hermione stood up and walked back out to the living room. Her feet tangled in something and she looked down to see the black jumper in a heap on the floor. She leaned down and picked it up, running the fabric gently through her fingertips. It really was nice. Much better feeling than the silk pajamas. With a quick unfasten of her cloak, Hermione lifted the jumper and put in on over her head. Her arms were already starting to feel better from that Healing Potion, but she still needed to rub that paste on them.

Once the jumper was on, she hung the cloak up in the wardrobe in the guestroom, but not before emptying the contents in its pockets. She put everything in a row on the dresser. The knife. The map. And the chocolate bar. This was all she owned. All she had to her name. Two gifts and a free brochure. How pathetic she had become.

Heading back out towards the kitchen, Hermione stopped near the bookshelf and noticed a frame on it with a photo of Draco and his parents together on Platform 9 ¾. It had to have been his first year at Hogwarts by how small he was. On closer inspection, she could even see herself running chaotically in the distant background, probably trying to get all of her things in perfect order.

Hermione was just about to put the photo facedown when she took a good look at Narcissa, standing there with her husband and son, looking so genuinely happy. She died because she lied to Lord Voldemort. A lie that had managed to save Harry's life. Hermione just couldn't be angry with her.

But she still loathed Lucius and there was no way she could have his cold eyes staring at her every day. After finding some blank parchment in the desk, Hermione tore a small piece of it, went over and put it over Lucius's figure. There. Now only Draco and his mother were visible. And the tiny Hermione, running innocently in the background.

Once that was done, Hermione headed towards the kitchen, stopping along the way to put the slippers on her frozen feet. She began looking through the cabinets, trying to find something decent to eat. Draco didn't have a lot, but he at least had enough for her to make a sandwich.

While Hermione ate, she fidgeted with the burners on the stove and the dial for the oven to see if they worked without magic. They did. That would come in handy since she was currently without any.

As soon as her sandwich was finished, Hermione stared longingly at the open blue box on the counter. That cupcake looked delicious and she really, really wanted it. But she had already put on the jumper and the slippers. How much more of her integrity could she compromise?

After an innocent lick of frosting, Hermione huffed and closed the box. She went over to the sofa and sat down.

"Oh!" she exclaimed pleasantly as she sank into it.

Draco had always seemed like one of those people who would own uncomfortable furniture for the sake of style but this … this was actually quite nice. Plushy and comfortable, yet slightly firm. Just the way she liked her sofas. It was possibly even more comfortable than her bed.

Hermione sat there for a while, staring at the door but, when it didn't open, she became frustrated and started pacing around the flat. Eventually, she grabbed a blanket that she found in a closet and wrapped it around her before sliding open the glass door and crawling onto the balcony.

Hermione stayed hunched down where no one could see her, leaning against the wall of the flat while snuggled in the blanket. She could hear the two wizards who lived downstairs chatting animatedly and quickly learned that their names were Bronson and Quigley. Surnames, she assumed. They were actually quite hilarious to listen to and seemed like two people whose company she would enjoy. But then they were joined by a third.

"OI! Malfoy! What's with this notice we got about a fucking curfew? What am I, back in school again?" asked Bronson in his deep and pleasant voice.

"I don't make the rules," said Draco with a slight edge of frustration. "Give me the bloody bottle."

Several moments passed with nothing but a slight gulping sound.

"Whoa! Easy on the firewhiskey, mate!"

"I hate your cheap shit, but I bloody needed that," said Draco before slamming the bottle down. "You got a cigarette, Bronson? I left the ones you gave me upstairs."

"Sure thing, mate."

There were a few more quiet moments as, she assumed, they lit up cigarettes.

"So you gonna tell us what's bothering you?" asked Quigley in his higher and slightly crackly voice.

"No."

Hermione chuckled. That sounded about right.

"Then how the hell are we supposed to help you?" Quigley again.

"You're not."

"Come on, Malfoy. We always tell you our problems. We're mates, remember?"

"Never having enough firewhiskey and begging me to buy more for you is hardly a problem."

"Well … you have unlimited resources," said Bronson. She envisioned a smirk.

"I don't want to bloody talk about it."

"Suit yourself then."

There was a long silence.

"Am I *always* an arse?" asked Draco.

"Yes," Hermione whispered to herself.

"Yeah," said Bronson.

"Pretty much," said Quigley.

"So when I try to do something nice, that comes off as … creepy?"

Hermione smirked. For some reason, she found the fact that she had made Draco Malfoy question himself gratifying.

"How nice was it?" asked Bronson.

"Pretty fucking nice."

A pause.

"Well … are you gonna tell us?"

"No," Draco said coolly.

"Why not?" asked Quigley.

"Because it's none of your fucking business."

"Aw, come on!" Bronson again.

"No."

"Please!" Quigley.

"No!"

"Pretty, pretty, please -"

"Dammit, Quigley! I'm trying to be fucking serious here!"

"So are -"

"All I want to know is why when I help someone, they always, *always* think I have bloody ulterior motives! I can be nice!"

"Sure you can,' said Bronson. Hermione envisioned his smirk again.

"So when I buy someone a cupcake, why the hell would they construe that as something fucking different? Something bad!"

Another pause.

"You bought someone a cupcake?" asked Bronson. Now she envisioned his face all twisted with curiosity, much like her own had been. Even hearing Draco just say the word 'cupcake' was creepy to her.

"Aw, who was it? Was it a girl?" inquired Quigley. "Was it that girl from last night?"

"No."

"It was, wasn't it?" said Bronson. "I didn't get a good look at her but, from what I saw, she looked pretty cute."

"She's not."

Hermione chuckled again. Now *that* was the Draco Malfoy she knew.

"So … it wasn't her then?" asked Quigley. She didn't get as good a look at him as she did at Bronson yesterday, but she was pretty sure she was picturing him correctly as her mind made him cock his head in curiosity.

"It doesn't matter."

"Then why'd you buy her a cupcake?"

"I never said I did."

"Then why'd you buy *anyone* a cupcake."

Draco let out a deep sigh. "Birthday," he said so quietly that she barely heard him.

"A birthday!" Bronson said brightly, the image of him beaming entered her head. "That's not creepy! That's adorable!"

"You both are bloody fucking annoying, you know that?"

Another pause.

"I would be honored if you bought *me* a cupcake, Malfoy," said Quigley with a teasing sincerity.

"And on that note, I'm getting the fuck out of here," said Draco. "Thanks for nothing, you fucking arses."

"You kiss your mother with that mouth, Malfoy?" asked Bronson.

"My mother is dead."

This pause was a bit heavier.

"Sorry," said Bronson, his deep voice cracking slightly. "I forgot."

"Doesn't matter. If you go out, remember to watch the clocks."

"When the hell do we ever go out?"

"Good bloody point."

Hermione listened as their sliding door opened and then closed again. Crap. Now she felt bad.

In a rush, she crawled back inside, shut the door and got to her feet. She limped to

the kitchen as quickly as she could, opened the blue box and took one good look at the cupcake before stuffing it into her mouth.

The lock clicked on the door and she began chewing faster. When Draco walked inside, she had just taken the last oversized bite but had no time to chew.

Draco relocked the door, turned and looked a bit surprised to see her standing there with chipmunk cheeks. "What the hell are you doing?"

Hermione shrugged, thankful that he didn't pay her large cheeks any mind.

"You're bloody weird, you know that?"

Draco walked past her and headed towards his room, his eyes slightly shifting to look at the blue box on the counter. She could swear she saw a faint smile when he noticed it was empty.

As soon as he was gone, she tried to finish chewing, but he was back not even ten seconds later with a pack of cigarettes in hand. He headed for the balcony and, when his back was turned, she tried to chew again.

When Draco reached the door, he paused, noticing it was open a crack. "Were you out here, Granger?" he asked, turning back around.

Hermione shook her head.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded.

Draco stared at her curiously. "Say something."

She said nothing.

"Granger … did you hear me talking to Bronson and Quigley downstairs?"

She shook her head again.

"Are you lying?"

Another shake.

Draco took several steps towards her. "What's that you have in your mouth?"

Her eyes widened.

"Is it the cupcake?"

Giving in, Hermione gulped, almost choking on her bite.

Draco grunted. "Just swallow the fucking thing, will you?"

And so she did. "Sorry, I -"

"Not necessary," he said, walking back towards the balcony. "But, if you are going to go outside, you better be damn careful." He shut the door behind him.

Hermione remained in the kitchen for a few moments before clutching her blanket tighter around her shoulders and following him outside. She crawled again, making sure to stay low as she settled herself in the same spot, giving her the perfect view of Draco smoking a cigarette in an old chair. He waved his wand and put up what she immediately recognized as a Silencing Charm. It must have worked both ways because Bronson and Quigley's voices all but vanished.

They sat there in silence, both of them gazing out at the street, Hermione through a crack in the stone barrier. While watching a stray cat run across the dead street, she accidentally let the blanket slip off of her shoulder.

"How is that jumper working out for you?" asked Draco, eyeing it with a smirk.

Hermione quickly pulled the blanket back over her. "Yeah, it's … it's really quite comfortable," she answered honestly. Then she sighed. "Look, Malfoy, I don't … I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful, because I am. This is the most at ease I've felt in -"

"Four years, four months and seventeen days?" Draco cocked an eyebrow.

"Approaching eighteen," Hermione said with a dim smile. "But you have to understand why I'm … hesitant about you. Since the day of the war, I have not been around one person I can trust. And you … well, I know you're already fully aware of this, but we have a history."

"Yes, we do," he said, taking a drag of his cigarette. "And I'm sure my profession doesn't help."

"It really doesn't," she said. "And, well, it's just … I find it odd that, in all of this time, I never saw you. Not even once. I saw every other Death Eater there is but never you. Why is that?"

Draco sighed and glanced over at her. "I almost always knew where you were,

Granger. And I made a point to never be there myself."

"So you kept track of me?"

Draco nodded.

"All so you could avoid me?"

He nodded again. "I have heard stories about you over the years, and I had no interest in seeing you like that. The way you looked just yesterday … I had always been hoping to never have to witness that."

"Why?"

"Guilt," he said slowly and clearly. "For some reason, I have it when it comes to you."

"Gee, I wonder why?" she said, unable to stop herself from rolling her eyes.

Draco glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Before you go jumping to conclusions, I am not sorry I didn't shoot a Killing Curse at my aunt once she and my father had you in their clutches. If I had then I would be dead, and you would be one step closer to execution."

"That's not -"

"You're lucky I was there last night, Granger. You were mere moments away from getting caught and you know it."

Hermione took a deep and agitated breath. Her damn pride was really getting a beating. "All right, fine. I admit it. You saved me last night."

"About bloody time," he said with an amused smirk.

"I have to ask, Malfoy. If that is not the reason you have guilt when it comes to me, then what is?"

Draco took a long drag of his cigarette and moved his gaze back out to the abandoned street. His gray eyes sparkled almost silver in the moonlight and Hermione could not help but notice that they were not the most unpleasant things to look at. The effect was actually quite nice.

"We bumped into each other that day. Knocked each other over. Remember?"

"I do," she said, pulling her knees up to her chest and resting her chin on them. She gripped her nails deep into the blanket as flashes of memories filled her head. Memories of Harry and Ron. Of Harry's still figure looking so small and childlike in Hagrid's large arms as he carried him away from her. Of Ron's loving gaze as he gave her one final kiss. Of his hand letting go of hers …

"I had been hiding -"

Hermione blinked back to reality.

"- but the moment I heard the Dark Lord returned with his victory party, I knew I had to get out. I should have just stayed where I was. If I had, then maybe my aunt would never have caught up to my mother, and maybe you would have gotten wherever it was you were trying to go."

"I probably would have."

The two of them were suddenly overcome with that heavy sort of silence that makes everyone trapped inside of it incredibly uncomfortable. It was painful. So Draco and Hermione just continued to sit there, avoiding each other's' eyes for who knows how long.

It was a strange feeling, being thrown together with your enemy, especially when they all of a sudden decided to save your life. Hermione did not know how she was supposed to feel about Draco. She was trying to be grateful, but that hatred she had always felt towards him still boiled quite strongly in the pit of her stomach. It would be easier if she could somehow get inside of his head. To be able to understand him just that little bit more.

"Malfoy, why are you still here?"

Draco glanced sideways at her and cocked an eyebrow.

"I mean here, as a Death Eater and follower of You-Know-Who? It certainly doesn't seem like you want to be. If you did then you wouldn't be helping me."

Draco knocked some ash off of his cigarette and said, "Same reason you didn't off yourself four years ago."

Hermione was taken aback. Her stomach lurched as she lifted her head to get a better view of him. "What does that mean?" she asked out of morbid curiosity. Hermione wasn't thick. She knew she probably should have ignored it altogether, but she was never going to understand him more if she avoided the unpleasant questions.

"It means you did what you had to do to survive. You might hate yourself for it but, at least, you're alive."

Hermione's throat went raw. Yep, she was right. Unpleasant.

"Tell me something, Granger. Did you ever even consider death as an option when they were tossing you around from Death Eater to Death Eater? Or, better yet, from man to man?"

Hermione watched closely as Draco began to breathe more rapidly. His breath was hot and visible against the cold air, his stormy eyes finally sparking to life as he spoke to her, trying to justify his own dark thoughts by finding a similar feeling in a soul more tattered than his own.

"Did it ever cross your mind that just ending it all would be the better solution? That maybe it would be your only salvation? You'd be free, which is all you ever wanted, anyway." Draco sucked in his raw, steamy breath and closed his eyes. "So … did you?"

He opened them again slowly, turning his silver irises back towards her and waiting for an answer. In the light of the moon, she could see that even with this spark, his eyes were still dead behind the haze of tears. Much like how hers looked when she saw them in the mirror.

Hermione choked as she drew back her own tears. She did not want to appear weak in front of him, especially after all of the breakdowns she had already had. Still, she had a feeling she wasn't done yet.

"Of course I did," she answered honestly. "Nearly every day I thought about it. But the memory of what life once was … what it could be again … that's what kept me going. I could never have killed myself because it was too easy, and the best things in life aren't obtained by giving in. They're hard, but they're worth it."

Draco clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth and said, "I don't have memories like that. Even before all of this, I don't remember a time when I was sublimely happy."

"Not even in your childhood?" she asked.

"No," he answered. After taking one final drag of his cigarette, he put it out on the balcony and tossed it over the side.

"So what is it that keeps you going then? When you have these … thoughts?"

"Did I say I was talking about myself?"

"You didn't have to," said Hermione.

"Well, I wasn't. We were talking about you, remember?"

"Malfoy, you don't have to lie to -"

"I'm not lying," he said sternly, turning his sharp eyes towards her. "I would never off myself. Too much depends on me staying alive."

"What does that mean?"

Draco paused. He stared at her, unblinking for a moment before saying, "Nothing." Then he took out another cigarette and used his wand to light it.

Hermione stared at it with a growing curiosity. "That's a very Muggle habit you've picked up there."

"Yes," he said unfazed. "You can blame the blokes downstairs for it. They got me into it and have to pick them up for me."

"Why?" she asked

"They're in a part of the Black Market where even easily bribed Death Eaters are not welcome." Draco held out the pack and offered her one.

Hermione recoiled from them with disgust. "Absolutely not. It is a horrid habit that I do not condone in the least."

"Of course you don't," he said with an amused smirk. "Four years, countless hours of torture and you're still as predictable as ever."

"If you think you're going to pressure me into taking one -"

"Why in Salazar would I waste my breath?"

Hermione watched with a dazed fascination as Draco continued to smoke his Muggle cigarette. But, eventually, she just became dazed and her mind quickly drifted back to Harry and Ron. She was the closest she had been to finding them in years but, instead of beginning her journey to her two best friends, she was spending her evening sitting on a balcony with Draco Malfoy. Surely, there were better things she could be doing with her time.

Still, she stayed. As much as she hated to admit it, over the years she had been starved of all basic human interaction. Talking to someone about actual things, things that mattered to her - whether that someone be Draco Malfoy or not - talking out loud to him made Hermione feel … almost human again.

"Malfoy, may I ask you something?"

Draco shrugged. "I suppose it doesn't matter. We both know you're going to ask whether I say yes or not."

Hermione frowned. She really was predictable.

"It's … it's about Harry and Ron," she said almost shyly. "What do you know of them?"

He paused and looked at her. "Know of them?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow. "I'm a Death Eater, Granger. The two of them have probably spent a great deal of time making sure I know nothing."

"But surely you must know something -"

"We almost caught Weasel a few months back. During a raid on one of the Death Eater's homes. He's made a few appearances over the years, but Potter's been pretty good about staying hidden."

"But they're … together. Right?"

"Probably," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "They're both pretty active in the resistance. They all work together, but I'm not sure if they stay in the same place or not."

Hermione sighed in relief. So they had found each other without her. She hoped with all of her heart that Ron had not waited long for word from her, like she had promised. If she was lucky then he had caught on pretty quickly and gone to look for Harry right away. But, even after all of this time, she had a hard to convincing herself that this was true. Ron had waited for her to return longer than necessary. She was sure of it.

"I suppose, when you leave here, you will be going out looking for them?"

Hermione awoke from her daze to find Draco staring at her. She nodded absently. "Part of me cannot wait to see them again but another part … maybe an even stronger part is dreading it."

"Why?"

Hermione's eyes began to mist as she cradled her head back into her knees. "Because of everything that has happened to me. Because they would never understand."

"I thought they were your best friends."

"They are," she said with a sniffle. "But … after everything I've done … how can I face them?"

"What? What have you done?" asked Draco, cocking his head to try to get a look at her.

By now, Hermione was full on weeping. She did not know why she was talking about this with him but, somehow, she knew she had to. She had to get it out. And, in this unusual haven she had stumbled into, Draco was the only one around to listen.

"I used to fight back in the beginning. I would fight and claw and hit and scream until my throat and limbs were raw or they beat me unconscious. But then I just … stopped. I stopped fighting and I let them do whatever they wanted to me. It was easier. When I wasn't busy screaming, I had a better chance of closing my mind off to the world and finding a happy moment. One that had been buried somewhere deep inside of me that I could get swept into. The fight was killing me but it was still better than how I ended up. Instead, I just let myself die."

Draco said nothing as Hermione continued to sob into her arms. It was not long before the two of them were engulfed in a quiet so thick, you could cut through it with a knife. Just like the one she had used to slit Rodolphus' throat open …

"Granger …" Draco called after he had let his untouched cigarette burn to an ashy nub. "Why don't you ever say the word?"

"What word?" she asked, turning her head slightly towards him.

"You know. The word of what happened to you. What they did. You have mentioned torture without a problem but … you haven't said the other thing."

"Why does that matter?"

"I think you should say it," he said almost casually.

"Why?" she asked while weakly lifting her head.

"It might make you feel better."

"It won't."

"You don't know that."

Unable to look into his eyes, Hermione watched the way his chest heaved as he inhaled the smoke of his new cigarette. It stiffened as he let the smoke sink to his lungs. And then released as he blew it back out into the cold, night air. She needed to focus. She needed to stay focused on just one thing or else she was going to lose control, and Draco was the only thing in her line of sight that moved enough to keep her from sinking into her own mind. Where the not-so-happy memories were kept much closer than the ones of her school years with Harry and Ron.

"Say it, Granger."

"No," she protested, still focusing on his chest.

"Say the word."

"No!"

"Say the bloody fucking word, Granger! Tell me what happened to you!"

Her breaths were becoming short and frantic. "You *know* what happened to me!" she screamed.

"Yes, because I know Death Eaters. But Potter and Weasel … they know *nothing* about what goes on inside their heads. If you cannot even accept what happened yourself then how the hell do you expect them to do it?"

"They don't need to know everything!"

"So you'll keep secrets from them?"

"N-no."

"If you don't bloody tell them then that's exactly what you're doing! Keeping secrets!"

"No, it's -"

"Tell me what happened to you, Granger," demanded Draco in a deep, slow voice.

"Tell me what Rodolphus and the other Death Eaters did to you when they owned you. In their beds, in their corridors, in their filthy basements and pocket-sized closets that they kept you in. What did they do to you there?"

"Stop it," she pleaded, her face going white as she began to pull at her hair.

"Did they even bother to undress you? Or was it all just hurried and rough as they smacked you around and screamed out the word Mudblood? Did they let you shower after? Or were you left to soak in their sweat and your shame?"

Hermione's whole body began to shake. "Stop," she said through gritted teeth.

"Most of your owners hated you. They were repulsed by you and wanted to see you suffer. So they did it the best way they knew how. By breaking you."

"No."

"You're not the Hermione Granger I once knew in school. I can see that right now. The Granger I knew would have *never* let them defeat her."

"I haven't!" she protested, raising her voice.

"Yes you have!" said Draco, raising his own voice to match hers. "That is why you cannot say it! Because you're defeated! You're weak and you're defeated!"

"NO!" Hermione finally shouted as she jumped to her feet. "I AM NOT DEFEATED, MALFOY! HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU SAY THAT I AM!"

"Then prove it to me!" he demanded while jumping to his own feet. "*Tell me* what they did to you!"

"SHUT UP!" Hermione lunged forward and began beating her fists into him.

Draco took this moment to wrap his arms around her and carry her hysterical, thrashing body inside. He may have put up a Silencing Charm but they were still visible. If she was going to have this outburst then it needed to be where she couldn't be seen.

"Tell me what Rodolphus did to you at night when his wife was not home!"

"NO!" she cried as he put her back down. Not for one moment did she stop hitting him.

"TELL ME, HERMIONE!"

At the sound of her given name, Hermione's whole body went heavy. She began to sink to her knees, dragging Draco down with her. Her sobs were loud and frantic as she clutched onto the sleeves of the jumper he was wearing, holding on so tight that her nails ripped holes into it.

"They … they raped me, all right?" she finally admitted, her body instantly easing. "I was raped almost every day for … for over four years. Malfoy … why did this happen to me?" Hermione's head sunk into his chest, tears soaking through his jumper and into his skin.

"It shouldn't have happened to you, Granger," he said, stroking a comforting hand through her bushy hair. "This world has become sick and cruel under the Dark Lord's rule. But you … you're stronger than you think you are. And you're wrong."

"About what?" she asked through choked breaths.

"About you. Just because you stopped struggling, doesn't mean you ever stopped fighting. I think we both just witnessed that there is still plenty of fire in you."

Hermione let out a painful laugh as she continued to cry into him. Her death grip on his jumper began to loosen as she finally let herself relax in Draco's arms. Merlin, she never thought she would see the day where the two of them were willingly hugging, if that is what you would call this.

"I am going to do what I can to help you find Potter and Weasley, Granger. As soon as it is safe for you to leave here, I will find you a lead to their whereabouts. I am not without my connections in the resistance."

"Thank you," she said with a sniffle.

"And when you go back to them, you can go knowing that you were simply a victim of this ongoing war. You have done nothing wrong."

"A victim," she repeated evenly. "Like you."

She could feel Draco shake his head above her. "No. You and I … we're not the same."

"How so?" she asked.

"I've done things, Granger, while you … you've had them done to you. It's different."

Hermione wished she could argue, but it was hard to do that when she really had

no clue about everything he had done. He had mentioned to Rabastan on the Knight Bus that he was higher than him now. She could not imagine that he outranked someone much older than him and so horribly devoted to Voldemort without doing a few things that would tear his soul apart.

Suddenly, the clock that hung above the fireplace chimed. They both looked up to see it was half past six. That was it? For some reason, it felt much later.

"Time to take your medicine," said Draco, standing up and pulling her with him.

Hermione still had the blanket somewhat tangled around her and she fixed it before following him into the kitchen. After swallowing a spoonful of the green liquid, Draco gave Hermione a tank top and a pair of boxer shorts to change into so he could help her rub the ointment on her bruises.

"Who was the Death Eater who owned you before Rodolphus, Granger?" asked Draco as he got his first good look at the ankle that had been bothering her. It wasn't just sprained, it was full on broken. He finally gave in and used his wand to heal this one spot, planning to tell the Dark Lord that he got into a pub brawl or something. There was just no way he could leave it untouched.

"What good will knowing do, Malfoy?" she asked.

"Just give me a name."

Hermione sighed and said, "Alecto Carrow. She was angry because her brother, Amycus, was recently killed -"

"During that raid I told you Weasley was a part of -"

Hermione's jaw dropped slightly.

"- yes, I know."

"Yes, well, she took her anger out on me. She used the Cruciatus Curse on me so often that I'm surprised I never lost my sanity. Or maybe I have. That would certainly explain how I ended up here, if this was all just a figment of my disturbed imagination."

"Hmm," said Draco, pursing his lips as his mind began to wander.

Hermione noticed that look of thought that suddenly engulfed him, but she didn't feel she had much right to question it.

"You need to stay off your ankle for a while," he said, snapping back to focus. "No more of this walking all around the flat. You need bed rest."

Before Hermione had the chance to protest, Draco had her scooped into his arms and was carrying her into the guestroom. He carefully placed her onto the bed and helped her back into the jumper he had given her before taking a seat on its edge.

"You look exhausted, Granger."

"I could say the same about you," she said, pulling the covers over her.

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

"You need time to heal. So lie down and get some sleep."

"What is with your incessant need to order me around?"

"What is with your incessant need to challenge everything I say? It is for your greater good, Granger, so, for once in your life, you should just listen."

"Fine," she conceded, scooting down on the bed and laying her head on the pillow. "You should really do the same."

"Is that an invitation?" he asked with a wink.

Hermione grabbed the spare pillow and smacked him with it. "Did you not just say we were being serious? Get some sleep, Malfoy."

"Wish I could," he said, standing up and walking towards the door, "but I actually need to be heading out."

"But what about the -"

"Curfew?" he finished. "I'll be back long before then. And I will probably have some company with me, so you need to make sure to stay in this room."

Hermione let out a frustrated sigh. "Fine. All these damn rules," she mumbled as she nuzzled into her pillow with her back to him.

"I also have duties in the morning, so I'll be leaving here fairly early and won't be back until evening."

Hermione turned in her bed so she was facing him. "Death Eater duties?" she

asked.

"Yes. Despite our current … situation, I still am one and I have to keep up appearances."

"Yes, I suppose you do." Hermione's eyes began to flutter closed. "Goodnight, Malfoy. And, uhh … thanks for tonight. Not my greatest birthday but at least I had one. And being able to smack you around a bit was definitely one of my better gifts." She smiled softly before closing her eyes completely.

"Don't mention it."

Draco used his wand to turn out the lights before slowly shutting the door. Once he was out of there, he went into his room and quickly cleaned himself up. While all of that talk may have been beneficial for her psyche, it was horribly damaging to his. He did things. She had them done to her. He was guilty. She was innocent. There were no shades of gray here, only black and white.

Draco let out a deep and painful sigh before grabbing his cloak and heading out the door. Hermione got her release tonight. And now it was time for Draco to get his.

<center>XXX</center>

Hermione was awoken several hours later by the sound of muffled voices coming from Draco's room. At first, they seemed fairly normal and she thought nothing of them, but then they became more frantic and she started to worry that something was wrong. She was about to get up and check on him when she remembered that he had specifically told her to stay in the room. He had mentioned company, but what sort of company would be making those horrible, horrible sounds?

"*Ah! Mmm … Oooh … yes*!"

Hermione's eyes went ridiculously wide as it finally dawned on her what was going on in there. Her face was taken over by a look caught somewhere between horror and disgust as she quickly brought her hands up to her ears. Unfortunately, that did absolutely nothing, especially when the loud slapping sounds began.

Oh, Merlin, he was spanking her!

Hermione nearly vomited as an image of Draco and a faceless witch going at it in the style most appropriate for his slaps entered her mind. She grabbed her pillow and quickly threw it over her head, trying desperately to drown out the noise. She

did not know what she had expected when he mentioned company, but *this* certainly was not it.

Damn these thin Muggle walls.

"*Yes! Yes! Keep going, uh … whatever the fuck your name is! I don't care!*"

Hermione took a moment to roll her eyes in her tight, dark space. Real class act, Malfoy.

"*Yes! Right there! Right there! Fuck! Fuck! OH FUCK*!"

A few moments later, the noises stopped and Hermione thanked Merlin with more enthusiasm than she ever had in her life. Still, she remained hidden under her pillow as an extra precaution. Somehow, she got the feeling Draco was not against second rounds.

"*That was amazing*!" the girl said between heavy breaths.

"*Yeah, sure*," said Draco unconvincingly. Hermione heard his bed creak and then several footsteps. "*You should probably get a move on. Curfew starts in a half hour.*"

"*What? But … can't I stay here tonight*?"

"*No.*"

"*Why not*?"

"*Well, I don't think my wife would like it very much when she gets home in about ten minutes.*"

Hermione chuckled … and then felt incredibly guilty about it.

"*YOUR WIFE*?"

"*That's right.*"

She could almost see the smirk spread across Draco's lips.

"*You fucking asshole*!"

The bed creaked again, followed by many angry stomps as the girl shuffled around the room, probably looking for her clothes.

"*I should have known better than to come home with a Death Eater*!"

Yes, you should have.

"*You whole bloody lot think you live above the rules!*"

"*We do.*"

"*Fuck you*!"

Draco's bedroom door opened and then slammed, followed shortly by the front door. Hermione listened as Draco walked out of his room and across the flat. There were several clicks, signifying that the Lock Charms were in place. His footsteps returned to his room and, then, he was silent.

Hermione lay in bed for a while after, trying to process everything she had just heard. Earlier that evening, she had been starting to think that maybe Draco had changed. She was not sure if it was for the better or not, considering the life he presently lived, but he definitely did not seem like the Draco she once knew.

But now … now she felt like she was back in school. Perhaps she was Head Girl and rooming with the insufferable Slytherin who just so happened to be Head Boy. The same pompous prick she had met on the Hogwarts Express her first year.

Suddenly, a wide smile began to spread across Hermione's face.

Nope. Draco Malfoy had definitely not changed. Not entirely, anyway. Now … why did she find comfort in that?

# Chapter 4: Fixing a Hole

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*Hermione screamed out for Harry and Ron as she ran through the dark corridors of Hogwarts. Her heart was beating fast as she heard Harry's voice faithfully call out, "Expelliarmus!"*

*Bodies littered the halls Hermione ran through while she tried desperately to reach her best friend, causing the putrid smell of death to spoil the air. But there was no time to stop and look. No time to dwell on who had been lost in this horrible war. Only one thing mattered. Finding her way back to Harry and Ron. Together they could end this. Together nothing could stop them.*

*Finally reaching the Great Hall, Hermione stopped and stared as Harry stood facing Lord Voldemort, their wands locked between powerful spells. At first, it seemed like Harry was winning, but then, just when she thought he had him, Voldemort's green jet of light pushed forward and shot at Harry. His body went stiff as he flew back against the wall, falling to a lifeless heap on the floor.*

*"HARRY!" she cried, trying so hard to run for him but her feet would not budge, her entire body feeling as heavy as lead.*

*"Hermione!"*

*She looked to see Ron running towards her, his arm outstretched as he reached for her. She lifted hers and did the same, wanting desperately to know what it felt like to touch those fingers again. Even if it was just once more.*

*He was so close, so close she could smell him, that intoxicating aroma of grass on a hot summer's day and something else she had never quite been able to place. But, before he could reach her, she was knocked off her feet and being pulled away from him. Dragged further and further until his red-headed figure became nothing more than a speck in the distance.*

*"NO! RON! HARRY!" she cried.*

*"Shut up, Mudblood!"*

*"NO!"*

*Someone grabbed her by the waist and flipped her so she was facing them. Hermione screamed as he stared down at her. The cold and angry eyes of Lucius Malfoy that she could never forget. Lord Voldemort and Bellatrix watched her from over his shoulder, amused smirks distorting their already hideous faces. The smell of death had never been so strong.*

*"You belong to us now, Mudblood," said Bellatrix, cackling wickedly as she stepped forward. "You will never see your precious Weasley again."*

*No.*

*"And Harry Potter's life will finally be taken by my wand," said Voldemort. "The Elder Wand. It is over, Mudblood. We have won."*

*No.*

*"Stop crying, Mudblood!" shouted Lucius, smacking her hard across the face.*

*"No!"*

*Those eyes … Those piercing, cruel gray eyes.*

*"Mudblood!"*

*"NO!"*

"Granger!"

"NOOO!"

"Granger, wake the fuck up! It's me!"

Lucius's eyes continued to stare down at her. Hermione thrashed around violently as he tried to hold her still.

"No! You can't have me! YOU'LL NEVER HAVE ME!"

"Granger! Fuck! It's me! Draco! You're having a nightmare! Wake the fuck up!"

Hermione's body eased slightly as the hold on her suddenly seemed gentle. She looked back into Lucius's eyes only to see them melt away and become Draco's. The differences were slight but they were there. A shade lighter with a pale-blue

ring around the pupil and slightly softer around the edges. And kind. These eyes were kind. Especially when waking her from a nightmare.

"Again?" Hermione said, almost sounding frustrated as she panted in his arms.

"I know," said Draco. "Third time since you got here." Which was ten days ago now.

Once Hermione's breathing evened out, she looked at him and frowned. "I woke you."

He shook his head. "No. I couldn't sleep."

"Why?" she asked.

"I rarely do," said Draco with a halfhearted smile.

"Too much on your mind?"

"No. I am just a light sleeper."

Hermione frowned deeper. She knew he was lying.

"Any little noise will wake me up and, once I do, I can never get back to sleep."

"So no solution then?"

"Of course there is. It's called firewhiskey," he said matter-of-factly. "Helps me on night's when sleep is necessary."

She smiled softly. "How about tea?"

"Firewhiskey is better but I suppose I'll humor you. Just this once."

Draco got up from the bed and walked out to the kitchen. Hermione took a moment alone to compose herself. Her nightmares were always the same. A combination of her most horrible memories and her greatest fears. And it always felt so real. So painfully and hideously real.

After wiping a single tear from her cheek, Hermione sucked back her nerves and followed Draco out. She grabbed her favorite blanket from off the back of the sofa and leaned on the counter while he proceeded to make her tea.

"So did you get your slag out before midnight this time?" she asked.

Draco's shoulders bobbed as he chuckled. "You bet sweet Salazar I did. I fucking took my eyes off the clock for two seconds that one night. Never again."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You didn't have to be such an arse to her about it."

"I thought I was a perfect gentleman."

"You *made* her sleep on the floor."

"I gave her a blanket."

"And a pillow?"

"Oh, right! I forgot about that." He glanced over his shoulder and smirked at her. "Whoops."

Hermione huffed. "You're such a git."

"Spare me your judgments, Granger, because I really couldn't give a shit," said Draco, looking back at his task. He used his wand to open a cabinet and levitated two mugs over to him.

Once the tea was finished, he handed her a red mug - which she had already decided was her favorite days ago - and the two of them walked over to the sofa, taking seats on opposite ends, as they were accustomed.

"Mind if I make one more judgment?" she asked as she settled into her seat.

"You mean you haven't already?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes.

Draco rolled his, a habit he quickly realized he was picking up from her. Only ten days here and she was already getting under his skin. "On with it, Granger."

"I'm just a little surprised that you know how to make tea and," she took a sip, "it's not bad."

"Why?" He sneered.

"I don't know. I suppose it's because, back in school, you hardly seemed self-sufficient. Didn't you grow up with a house-elf doing everything for you?"

"Of course I did. But I don't exactly have a house-elf here now, do I?"

"Not that I've seen."

"The Malfoy family house-elf spends the majority of his time at the manor. Ever since my mother died, my father has not kept up with the place. It is its task to make sure the place doesn't go to ruins."

"It?"

"Yes, the house-elf."

"House-elves are not '*its*', Draco. They are 'his' and 'hers' or 'he's' and 'she's'."

"Says who?" he asked, crinkling his forehead. "They're more object than human."

Hermione's jaw dropped.

Draco smirked. "Are you going to yell at me now, Granger?"

"You're damn right I am! What right do you have to say something so degrading about a poor and defenseless creature?"

"Every right. I own *it*."

"*He*!" she yelled.

Draco froze. "What?"

"*He! Not it! HE!*"

"How do you know if my family's house-elf is a 'he' or not?" His eyes drifted slightly towards the photo on his bookshelf. The one where - he noticed previously - she had covered the image of his father.

Hermione felt herself go white. "Or she," she said quickly. "'He' is just a natural default."

"Like my 'it'?"

"No, Malfoy" said Hermione slowly and clearly. "It is not the same."

"What a bloody double standard!"

Hermione had stopped listening. Draco watched closely as she sucked on her bottom lip, very visibly falling into the depths of her own mind again. She did that a lot.

"Granger," he called.

It was a few seconds before she looked up and noticed him again. "Sorry," she said before taking another sip of her tea. "I think I am going to take this to bed. I really need to work on getting past these nightmares."

She started to stand, but Draco reached across the sofa and grabbed her arm before she got very far. "Wait, Granger. I have heard that, sometimes, it helps to talk about your nightmares."

Hermione blinked. "Talk about it?"

"Yes."

She blinked again. "With you?"

"That is what I was getting at, yes. I can see now why they called you the brightest witch of our age."

"And it's comments like that that make me not want to tell you anything."

Draco smirked. "Come on, Granger. I humored you with the tea. Even made a cup for myself instead of hitting the bottle. Now, it's your turn to humor me."

Hermione pursed her lips as she began to study him. Since the day she got here, Draco had been putting on this persona that never felt quite right to her. Something was off, and she had a hard time believing he cared at all about her nightmares. If she had to make a guess, she would say that he simply did not want to be alone. If he really did never sleep, like he said, then she could imagine that the nights got pretty lonely here, especially when he was so unwilling to let anyone stay over. And it wasn't like she had to be anywhere in the morning … She might as well 'humor' him.

With a light sigh, Hermione sunk back into her seat. Draco removed his hand from her arm and returned to his. They both sat with their feet up, hers crossed beneath her while his were out in front of him, one bent and one straight.

Hermione took another sip of her tea before starting. "I don't know what you're expecting, Malfoy. My nightmares are not exactly cryptic. I just dream about the Battle of Hogwarts. That's all."

"Am I in it?" he asked while circling his wand over his tea. A few sparks shot out of it and he took a sip. A Sweetener Charm.

"No," she said honestly. In all of her years reliving this same nightmare, not once had Draco made an appearance. It was always just Lord Voldemort, Bellatrix and … Lucius. A shiver ran through her. "Why do you ask?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose it's the way you look at me every time I wake you. Like you're ready to kill."

The smallest of smiles crept onto Hermione's lips. "Sorry."

"I suppose it's my fault, anyway, for even attempting to wake you. I wouldn't bother at all if your damn screams weren't loud enough to alert the whole fucking neighborhood."

Hermione frowned. "Well, maybe if you put up a Silencing Cham around my room, like I ask every day after you bring one of your slags over, we wouldn't have that problem."

"You *know* I can't do that. The Dark Lord checks our wands every morning. It's his way of keeping us under his iron thumb. Then he sends us out to check the whole bloody city's wands so they're under *our* iron thumb."

"But you use a Silencing Charm every time I'm out on the balcony."

"Yes, because I can use it once and say I have loud or nosy neighbors." Which he did. "It's either a Silencing Charm at night or your balcony privileges, Granger. I'll let you make the call."

Hermione's frown deepened. She looked down at her tea and quietly said, "Balcony."

"What was that?" he said, leaning his left ear towards her. "I couldn't quite hear your mumbling. Speak up, Granger."

"Balcony," she said slightly louder as she looked up and scowled at him. He was such an arse.

Draco smirked. "I knew it. I knew you secretly enjoyed hearing me shag."

Hermione's cheeks flushed. "N-no -"

"Don't deny it, Granger. I can see it written all over your face."

"Stop it."

"Come on, Granger. I might actually believe you if you weren't blushing."

Now her whole face was red. "I said, stop it, Malfoy."

"Not until you -"

"I *need* to go out on the balcony so I don't suffocate in here! ALL RIGHT?"

Draco's eyebrows rose high into his hairline as he gave her a look of surprise. His face stayed frozen like that for a few moments, unblinking until, eventually, that signature grin of his returned. "If you'd like, I can give you a few pointers."

Hermione gazed at him, heavy breaths coming out steadily through her nose. Then she rolled her eyes. "You repulse me."

Draco's grin widened. "Ah, now there's the Granger I remember. We'll have you cursing at me like we're in school again in no time."

The corner of her mouth twitched upwards. "Cockroach."

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

"SHIT!"

Hermione popped awake at the suddenness of Draco's screams.

"I'm fucking late!"

Still a bit disoriented, she looked around to see that she was still in the living room. A flash of platinum blond hair ran by her.

"I work for a sadistic psychopath and I'm fucking late. Fuck!"

His door slammed and, a few seconds later, she heard the water running in his personal shower.

Hermione waited a few more seconds for the shower door to open and then close. Once she heard the click, she got up from the sofa and tiptoed over to his bedroom door. She opened it just enough for her to slip in and went over to his bed, thoroughly searching the pillows for any stray hairs belonging to whichever slag he had brought over the previous night.

This was Hermione's only chance to do this, since Draco always used his wand to rid his sheets of last night's conquest before he left. She was, of course,

absolutely repulsed by this task, constantly fearing that she would accidently come across a different kind of hair, but it was necessary. She had been here going on eleven days now and her body was finally starting to feel normal again. It was time to prepare.

Hermione finally located a hair, long and honey-blonde this time. That made three blondes and one raven-haired since she'd been here, only missing one from the first slag while adjusting to his routine. Hair in hand, she slipped out of his room and went to hers. She took out a plastic baggie she had found lodged underneath the sink - probably left behind by the previous tenants - and put this hair in with the rest.

Once that was done, Hermione caught sight of the list she had written yesterday and slid it into her pocket. She then went back out to the living room to wait for Draco so that she could give it to him.

The water turned off and there was more shuffling around his room. Draco was rarely ever late in the mornings and was always really good about eating breakfast. Looking at the clock, she realized that there would be no time for that. On instinct, Hermione went into the kitchen and plugged in the toaster, having discovered earlier that all of the outlets in this flat did actually work. The device must have also belonged to the previous tenants, but she had still witnessed Draco use it on several occasions, only the magical way. The idea of plugging it in had probably never even crossed his mind.

Hermione took out a loaf of bread from the small pantry and cut two slices. While they were toasting, she grabbed some jam from the refrigerator and a knife from the drawer.

Draco burst out of his room just as she was finishing spreading the jam on the finished pieces of toast. His eyes scanned the flat until they located her. She walked over and handed him a slice.

"Here," she said. "You should eat something before you go."

After staring suspiciously at the toast in her outstretched hand, Draco looked at her and lifted his eyebrows. "How did you make that without magic?"

"E-lec-tri-city, Draco. Apparently, when you Death Eaters took over the city, no one thought to shut it off."

"What is elec -?"

"Not important," she said, shoving it more forcefully into his hand. He took it. While he still stood there baffled, she took a bite of her own slice. "I have compiled a list of everything I need at the Black Market. Are you still going to be able to go for me today?"

"Uh … yes, I should have time," said Draco, finally getting back his senses and chomping aggressively into his food.

Hermione took the list out of her pocket and handed it to him. Draco unfolded the parchment and scanned it over carefully. After reading only a few items, he turned to her and cocked an eyebrow. "You planning to brew Polyjuice Potion?" he asked.

"I am," she said.

"There really is no need. I am sure they have some already made -"

"No, I want to do it," she said sternly. "It has been years since I've brewed a potion and I would like to give it a try."

"You were second best at Potions in our year. I doubt -"

"I was *the* best, Malfoy. Don't delude yourself into thinking otherwise."

He sneered at her while taking another aggressive bite of his toast.

"Be that as it may, I am out of practice. And since I am without a wand, I will need you to assist me."

"You know I can't -"

"The same incantations used to make Polyjuice Potion are also used to make a very basic Sleeping Draught. I believe the lie should be obvious."

Draco grunted. "Yeah, sure, fine," he said, slipping her list into his pocket. "It takes about a month to complete. Have you finally accepted that you're going to be stuck here for at least that long?"

"I suppose I have," she said, taking another bite. "You're late, remember?"

Draco's eyes went wide as he let out a loud, "SHIT!" and ran to the door. "Don't forget! No balcony when I'm not here!"

She waved at him nonchalantly and shrugged a, more-or-less, affirmative 'yes'.

"I mean it, Granger! You are in hiding. Never forget that."

"I *know*," she said firmly.

Draco narrowed his eyes at her and took a forceful bite before opening and then slamming the door.

Finding herself alone, yet again, Hermione made herself a cup of coffee before curling herself back in her favorite blanket on the sofa. She really should have tried to go back to sleep, and in the proper location this time, but she knew it was pointless. By now, she had accepted that she would never get a decent night's sleep again. There were just too many things plaguing her dreams.

Hermione sat there in silence for a while, her finger absently tracing the rim of her mug as she stared over at the bookshelf of untouched books. Untouched by her, anyway. Draco had said she could read anything she wanted days ago, thinking that maybe his lack of permission was why she hadn't already, but, for some reason, she just couldn't bring herself to pick one up. Even though her body was healing nicely, her mind still didn't feel quite right, and she was afraid to find out just how much damage had been done to it.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione stood up from the sofa while carrying her blanket and untouched cup of coffee, and went out to the balcony.

XXX

"You're doing it wrong, Malfoy."

"Am not!"

"Yes, you are. You need to be more delicate with your movements or you'll crush the lacewing flies past the point of use. Ease your shoulder a bit."

"This is how I've always done it, Granger, and all of my potions have come out just fine."

"But mine always came out better. Just accept the correction, will you?"

Draco mumbled something foul before easing his shoulder and continuing to grind the lacewing flies into the mortar.

Hermione rolled her eyes before turning back to the brewing potion. She tossed in some knotgrass and began to stir. "I'm going to need the wand over here in a moment."

Stopping what he was doing, Draco took his wand out of his pocket and walked over to the cauldron. When Hermione stopped her stirring and gave him a nod, he recited a small incantation over it.

Once that was done, he put his wand down on the counter and went back to his previous task.

Hermione got everything else ready while the potion continued to brew. Only, something was missing. "Malfoy, where are the leeches?" she asked.

Draco began looking around with her, but he didn't see them. "I must have left them in my bag," he said before heading towards his bedroom.

Continuing to look around the kitchen, Hermione finally found the jar of leeches lodged between the stove and the wall. She had probably knocked them by accident.

"Got it, Malfoy!" she called to him.

"Fine! Gonna take a piss if your dictatorship will allow it!" he called back.

Hermione rolled her eyes again. She did that a lot when he was around.

Keeping her eye on the clock, Hermione saw it was time to add some of the other ingredients. She undid the jar of leeches and dumped them in, followed shortly by the lacewing flies, but not until she gave them a few more *proper* grinds. Once that was done, she needed a wand.

Noticing that Draco's was sitting on the counter, Hermione instinctually grabbed it and waved it over the cauldron.

"What the *fuck* are you doing with *my* wand?"

Hermione whipped around in surprise. Draco was standing in the doorway of his bedroom, scowling at her.

"Sorry, I …" Why had she grabbed his wand again? "Habit."

"How the fuck is it a habit? You have barely touched a wand in four fucking years," said Draco scornfully. He marched over and tore his wand out of her trembling hand. "Never, *ever* touch my wand again! You fucking hear me?"

"I-I'm sorry," she stuttered. "I didn't mean to upset -"

"Do I bloody look upset?"

"Well … yes, I would say -"

"No one *asked* you!"

"But you just -"

"Stupid, fucking MUDBLOOD! Stay the FUCK away from my WAND!"

Hermione's eyes began to tear as Draco turned on his heel and marched into his bedroom, dramatically slamming the door behind him. She was too stunned to move. He had only ever called her *that* word the one time, when she had been yelling at him for doing nothing more than being nice. But he had never called her it just because. Not since their time in school and, in her mind, she had already successfully split this Draco Malfoy and the other one into two different people.

But now his old self had never felt so close, so real. Every day she would justify her staying with a Death Eater by convincing herself that he was different than the rest, but how different could he really be if he still saw her that way? Just a filthy Mudblood.

One word was all it took for Hermione to lose that ease she had been feeling for the first time in years. Now, she felt as scared as ever.

Without another thought, Hermione took off running for her room. She could not stay here another minute. Not with *him*.

She snatched her cloak out of the wardrobe and threw it on, then grabbed her knife, map and chocolate bar off of the dresser and tossed them into her pocket. Once she had everything, she ran back out to the living room, found her ragged boots in the closet by the front door and put them on. Then, with a deep breath, she pulled on her hood, opened the door and left the flat for the first time in almost two weeks.

Without taking a moment to look back, she ran down the stairs two at a time, and left that building as fast as she possibly could, barely noticing Bronson sitting in the hall outside of his flat, eyeing her curiously as she sped by.

Draco was in his washroom, splashing his face with cold water when he heard the door. He whipped his head around and tried to listen closer to see if his ears had deceived him, but there were no other sounds.

He quickly left his room, calling the name, "Granger," as he headed into her room.

She wasn't there. So he checked her washroom. Nothing. And then the balcony. She was nowhere. "Granger!" he called louder. No one answered. "Fuck!"

Draco went to the front closet and quickly pulled out his cloak. He noticed her shoes were missing as he put on his own.

"Fuck, fuck, FUCK!" he shouted before running out the door and down the stairs.

"Hey, Malfoy, what's going on -?"

Draco ignored Bronson as he passed him. He had no time for him right now. Every moment Hermione was outside was a moment too long. The search for her was still going strong and it was only a couple of hours until curfew. There was no way she could find a successful way out of the city by then. Even he did not know how to get out and he was a bloody Death Eater. He had to find her. *Now.*

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Hermione did not know how long she had been running for, she just wanted to get as far away from there as possible, but it was time for her to stop and think about where she was going.

Ducking into the first alley she saw, Hermione took out the map she had taken from the Knight Bus and began looking it over. She had already pinpointed the spot Draco lived days ago and she was pretty sure she had run east. One look at the stars confirmed it.

An entrance to the Underground was not far from here. She had once asked Draco if the people hiding in there would be affected by the curfew and he had said no, because the spell Voldemort cast did not reach underground. But it was still very dangerous down there, and he did not envy anyone who chose it as their place of refuge.

Despite all of that, Hermione knew she was out of options. If she did not want to go back to Draco's then she needed to get underground before the curfew began.

Putting the map away, Hermione poked her head back out to the street and searched for any sign of life. There was none. She walked back out and began heading in the direction she was sure was right.

Hermione had barely turned onto the next block when someone did the same further down the street. A tall figure hidden underneath a dark cloak. They walked towards her and she tried to remain calm, so as not to bring any attention to herself.

The person slowed as she passed them, trying to get a good look at her, but she made sure they did not.

"'Ey! Curfew's comin' soon. You got somewhere to go?" asked a male voice she vaguely recognized.

Hermione pretended she did not hear him and kept walking.

"'Ey! I'm talkin' to you!"

She paused, turned slightly and said, "I'm just trying to get home." Then she kept going.

Hermione did not even hear the footsteps, but they must have been there since someone was suddenly grabbing her arm and pulling her into the closest alley. She was slammed hard against the wall.

"Lemme see your papers," he said, pulling up his sleeve so she could see the Dark Mark on his arm.

Hermione's breath hitched. She looked up and was immediately met with the shifty gray eyes of Marcus Flint, a Death Eater who had owned her once.

He stared back at her, looking hazed. Obviously drunk. It took a moment before there was that light of recognition. "Oh, shit! You're that fucking Mudblood, Granger!" And then he smiled, giving her an up-close and personal view of his hideously large and jagged teeth. "I can't believe it! I fucking caught Harry Potter's Mudblood! The Dark Lord is going to reward me immisley for this!"

"I believe you mean 'immensely'." She could not resist.

Flint's smile became a scowl. "Watch your fucking tongue, Mudblood. Guess I'll make this easy and just call 'im here." He took out his wand and readied himself to touch it to his Dark Mark.

Hermione could not breath as she stared at the tattoo on his arm, her palms sweating as her heart slowed. She needed her knife. She needed to get to her fucking knife but he had her pinned.

Flint hesitated and looked closely at her. His smile returned. "Or we can have some fun at my place before you're executed. You know. One last hoorah."

Hermione grimaced at the thought. Flint leaned into her and she tried to push him

off, but he seized her wrists.

"This'll be fun."

"No!"

He used his wand to bind her wrists and began pulling her back out to the street.

"GET OFF OF ME!" Hermione kicked him away from her and reached into her pocket with her bound hands, finally pulling out her knife. Even while tied up, she still landed a successful slash across his chest. It was not deep, but it was enough to make him take a couple of steps back.

"You fucking -"

Both of their heads turned when they heard someone's feet skid and stop at the entrance to the alley. Hermione had never felt so relieved to see Draco standing there. He was panting heavily and had obviously been running for a while.

"Malfoy, what you doin' here?" asked Flint, clearly unhappy about having to share his credit in finding Potter's Mudblood.

"Granger?" said Draco, looking at her unsurely for a moment.

Hermione pulled her hood slightly back and nodded.

"Yeah, Granger," said Flint. "I found 'er. Was just goin' to call the Dark Lord." He pulled up his sleeve again and readied his wand.

Draco took a step forward and took out his own wand, casting a nonverbal *'Expelliarmus'* that caught Flint completely off guard. His wand flew effortlessly into Draco's hand. Hermione's eyes widened. He had improved a lot since their school years.

"What the fu -"

Draco put his own wand away and used Flint's to cast another nonverbal spell. There was a bright jet of light that sent Flint hurling backwards. He walked up to Hermione then and held out his hand. "Give it here, Granger."

Hermione hesitated only for a second before handing him the knife. He used it to cut through her binds and then handed it back to her.

"Next time, try using it *before* you're tied up."

"Y-you helpin' 'er, Malfoy?" asked Flint from where he sat, unmoving on the ground. "You helpin' Potter's Mudblood?"

"Looks like it," said Draco, taking several more steps forward with Flint's wand still aimed at its former master.

"B-but … why? You shaggin' 'er or somethin'?"

Draco said nothing. He would not even dignify a question like that with a response.

"'Cause I gotta tell you, I owned 'er before and it ain't nothin' spec -"

Draco aimed Flint's wand more forcefully.

"All right, all right! I take it back!"

"Granger, did he really own you before?" asked Draco, glancing sideways at her.

Hermione gulped before looking at Flint and nodding slowly.

"And did he treat you well?"

She took another moment to stare into Flint's shifty gray eyes before moving to Draco's fiery ones, which were twinkling silver in the moonlight as they so often did. She shook her head.

Draco looked back at Flint and furrowed his brow. "You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, Flint. Sorry it has to end like this."

"End?" repeated Flint with wide eyes. "Wait, Malfoy, n-"

A bright jet of green light shot out of the wand in Draco's hands and hit Flint straight in the heart. There was not even a moment of hesitation before his lifeless body was falling flat on the ground.

Hermione gasped and turned away. "Why did you do that?" she asked. "You didn't have to kill him."

"Yes, I did. The Imperius Curse and Memory-Erasing Charms are pointless when the Dark Lord is constantly checking our wands."

"But -"

"No buts. This is a bloody war, Granger. Aim to kill."

Hermione turned back and watched Draco as he stared at his fellow Death Eater's lifeless body, the sound of his words instantly bringing her back to their encounter during the Battle of Hogwarts. But, even with those same words, Draco had never seemed further from his old self than he did in that moment.

Draco remained placid as he stepped forward and transfigured Flint's body into an empty butterbeer bottle. He picked it up and tossed it into one of the old Muggle dumpsters against the alley wall. Then he walked over to Hermione.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he shouted. "Do you have a bloody death wish or something?"

"I-I …"

"The Dark Lord would already be planning your fucking execution if I hadn't been close enough to hear you scream! Dammit, Granger! Why the fuck did you leave?" Draco's face turned a bright shade of red as he continued to scream at her.

"You … you called me Mudblood," Hermione said softly.

"What?" he spat.

"You called me Mudblood, Malfoy," she repeated. "You try to act like you've changed but if that's how you view me -"

"That's not how I fucking view you, Granger! I was pissed! I didn't mean it!"

Hermione's face stiffened as her throat suddenly went raw. "Y-you didn't?"

"Of course not! If I saw you that way then why the fuck would I be helping you?"

"I … I don't know -"

"I wouldn't!" Draco continued to stare at her with his flaming eyes. After a moment they began to soften. "Look, Granger, I am not going to lie to you and say that all my prejudices are gone, because they're not. I still believe purebloods are superior."

Hermione began to roll her eyes.

"Don't you fucking do that," he said harshly. "Let me finish before you go and judge me."

She waited.

"Yes, I believe purebloods are superior, but I don't believe Muggle-borns should be treated as they are, and I certainly don't use that … that 'term' anymore. I try not to, anyway. Occasionally, it will slip out."

"So, then, do you still believe Muggle-borns shouldn't be able to learn magic?"

Draco looked off to the side and sighed. "I don't know. It doesn't really matter right now, does it?"

"It does to me," Hermione said seriously.

Looking back at her, Draco saw that she had tears in her eyes. In their short time together, he had come to realize that he absolutely hated seeing her cry. "I suppose I can't deny people with magical blood their right to use it. I mean, look at you. Brightest witch of our age, remember?" He smiled.

Hermione tried to smile back, but had a hard time finding any joy in this moment.

"Come on, Granger," said Draco, holding out his hand.

Hermione looked at it skeptically.

"Look, I'm sorry I called you Mudblood -"

Hermione's eyes snapped back to his. He had never said that word to her before. *Sorry*.

"- but you can't stay out here. I don't know where you were going, but I can promise that it is not safe. Now, let's go."

Hermione looked back at his hand and watched closely as she placed hers inside of it, a weird feeling tingling in her stomach as he gave hers a squeeze.

Without another word between them, Draco pulled her to the edge of the alley. He looked back out at the street and made sure the coast was clear before leading her out and heading back towards his flat.

Hermione did not take her eyes off of their clasped hands as they walked, her head still ringing with that word. *Sorry*. Draco Malfoy was sorry for something he had done to her. She never thought she would see the day.

About halfway back to the flat, they heard several voices coming from around one of the corners. Draco grabbed Hermione and pulled her into another alley, pressing her against the wall and holding his body closely against hers, keeping

them shielded from view until the people passed.

Hermione looked up at his profile as he stared out towards the street, listening closely to make sure the people were gone. Draco had killed someone for her tonight, and she was not sure how she was supposed to feel about that. Marcus Flint was a bad person. He was a vile and cruel, and countless lives had probably been saved with his death.

The line between right and wrong was so thin in this war that Hermione could not decide where Draco stood. At one time, Marcus had been his friend. She was not sure of the extent of that friendship, but they were at least teammates in school. That had to have meant something. But, tonight, he had disposed of him so easily. For her. She just did not understand.

Without even realizing it, Hermione lifted her hands and clutched tightly onto the fabric of Draco's cloak that lay over his chest. He turned and looked at her right as she began to cry into him. His arms instinctually wrapped around her back.

"Granger, what's wrong?"

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "I just … I feel like such an idiot."

Draco had to chuckle a little. "What?"

"My mind has just been so muddled lately. I don't know what I was thinking, leaving like that. I didn't think it through at all."

"People make mistakes -"

"Not me," she said, crying harder. "My mind … it's not the same anymore, Malfoy. It's … it's not what it once was. They destroyed it. They …"

Hermione's legs gave in and she began to collapse to the ground. Draco tightened his hold on her and scooped her into his arms. "Come on, Granger. Let's get you home."

*Home.* She repeated this in her head as he carried her back towards his flat. Is that what this haven she had found was becoming? Her home?

Hermione clutched tighter onto Draco's cloak and nuzzled her head into his shoulder. She hated that she felt so safe here, like nothing could harm her while he had her wrapped in his arms. This dependence she was getting on him was not healthy. He was a Death Eater and Death Eaters were her enemy. She could never forget that.

When they got back to his building, Draco headed up the stairs very carefully. Right around the third floor, Hermione noticed someone blocking their path out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head slightly and met the curious gaze of Bronson.

"What the hell is going on, Malfoy? Who is -?"

"I have never cashed in on that favor you owe me, Bronson, and, now, I need to do just that. Mention this to no one. Not even Quigley. You understand?"

Bronson looked back at Hermione, his face twisting with the slightest flicker of recognition, but it seemed like he could not quite place her. He nodded and moved aside, watching closely as Draco ascended the stairs with the mysterious girl in his arms.

Once they got back inside the flat, Draco kicked off his shoes and went straight to Hermione's room, placing her carefully on the bed.

"What were you talking about down there, Malfoy?" she asked in a weak voice as he helped her remove her shoes and cloak. "Why does he owe you a favor?"

Draco's face remained unchanged as he emptied the pockets of her cloak. "Bronson and Quigley are both Muggle-borns."

Something jolted in Hermione's stomach as all of the air was literally knocked out of her.

"I forged their papers for them years ago. Gave them both witch and wizard parents, and one Muggle grandparent. Obviously, I wasn't going to make them purebloods." Draco smirked. He put her knife and map on the dresser, but paused when he came across the chocolate bar. "Why do you have this?" he asked.

"You gave it to me," she answered.

"I know, but why haven't you eaten it?" He looked over at her.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't own very much. If I eat it then that's one less thing that's mine."

Draco sighed and put the chocolate bar down beside the other items. As he hung her cloak in the wardrobe, he asked, "What were you saying before, Granger? About your mind?"

Hermione shrugged again.

He went over and sat on the edge of her bed. "Is that why you haven't been reading? You think the Cruciatus Curse damaged it?"

"Is that so farfetched?" she asked, wiping several tears from her eyes. "People have gone insane while enduring a lot less than I have. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm even really here. Like maybe this is all in my imagination or something. That would at least explain why you keep helping me." Hermione sighed. "Brightest witch of our age. That's what you keep saying to me. What a joke."

Draco pursed his lips as he took in the sad witch in front of him. "You're not crazy, Granger," he said. "The truth is I don't know why I'm helping you. It's not like we were ever friends. I mean, we were rarely even civil."

"We were never civil, Malfoy," she said with a slight smile.

He smiled back. "I know. But I just … I *have* to help you."

"Because of the guilt?" she asked, recalling their previous conversation.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "No, it's more than that. I want this war to end and Potter is the bloody child of prophecy. He's supposed to do it, but he hasn't made a move because he fears for your life. Four fucking years later and he still can't do a bloody thing without you."

"So you think getting me to him will make him act?"

"It will definitely change things," he said.

"Is that why … why you killed your friend for me tonight?"

Draco cocked an eyebrow.

"Marcus Flint," she said, as if it wasn't obvious.

"Flint wasn't my friend. He was a fucking bastard and he deserved what he got."

"But … he was your Quidditch captain."

"So?" said Draco. "That was years ago. Things were different back then."

Hermione's hands fidgeted with the edges of the comforter as she shyly looked down at it. "So is it always that easy for you? Killing people, I mean."

"It depends on who I'm killing," Draco said honestly. "I held Flint with about as

much regard as you probably held Rodolphus. My only concern now is what new restrictions will come with his disappearance. And I need to dispose of his bloody wand." He took Flint's wand out of his pocket.

"Do you have to?" asked Hermione, looking at it longingly.

"Yes, Granger. It is too dangerous to keep this here. I know you're anxious to use magic, but we need to find you a proper wand. One without the possibility of being traced." A light went off in his head as he remembered something.

"I know." She sighed heavily. "And I'm sorry I used your wand earlier. I really didn't mean to. I know how personal a wand is and how sharing can sometimes be seen as … intimate."

Draco chuckled softly at the way she blushed as she said the word 'intimate'. "It has nothing to do with the 'intimacy' of it all." He winked.

"Oh." Her blush brightened. "Then, why -"

"The last thing my mother ever did was give me that wand, Granger. It's the only connection with her I still have."

Hermione said nothing. She watched Draco closely as he avoided her eyes and slipped Flint's wand back into his pocket, obviously giving his own a slight touch as he did so.

"You should try to get some sleep," he said once some time had passed.

Hermione nodded and lied down in her bed, pulling the covers all the way up to her neck. Draco had just stood up to leave when she called his name. He looked back at her and, when their eyes locked, hers shifted slightly to the side.

"Will you stay for a little while? I'm not quite ready to sleep yet."

"You … want me to stay?" he asked hesitantly.

Finally, her eyes stopped on his and she gave him a shallow nod. "Just for a little while."

Everything in Draco's mind started screaming at him, telling him to say no. There was no reason for him to stay with her. But, in the end, he still heard himself say, "Yes," as he carefully climbed onto the bed and lay down beside her.

Hermione turned to face him and slowly closed her eyes.

"For what it's worth, I don't think your mind is as damaged as you think," he said.

"You don't?" she asked, her eyes opening slightly. She gazed at him through small slits. "Why?"

"Well, leaving tonight was pretty fucking stupid and I hope the old Granger would have known better, but you remembered the recipe for Polyjuice Potion by heart earlier, and you even recalled that the same incantations for it are used in a Sleeping Draught. That's not easy information to retain."

"You think so?" Her eyes widened to their full size.

"I do."

There was another round of silence as Draco turned his head and the two of them continued to gaze at each other. Before long, both of their eyes began to close.

As Hermione slowly drifted off to sleep she found herself asking, "Malfoy … are you sure I'm not crazy?"

"Positive," she heard him answer before falling into her first peaceful sleep in years.

# Chapter 5: From Me to You

**A/N: Just thought I should mention that the riddles in this chapter are not mine. I wish I was that clever ;-)**

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Draco was woken up the next morning by a knock on his front door. It started out soft enough, but quickly became more urgent. His eyes opened slowly and it took him a moment to recognize his surroundings. He was not in his own bedroom, as he expected, but in the guestroom instead. Feeling something on his hand, he turned his head to see a delicate female one placed inside of it and, beyond that, the serene face of Hermione, her eyelashes barely beginning to flutter as the knocking grew louder.

"Bloody hell." Draco yanked his hand out of hers and wiped it on his jumper. Which one of them had made *that* terrible mistake? He could not for the life of him remember, so it must have been her. He hoped.

Letting out several annoyed groans, Draco climbed out of the bed and left the room, making sure to shut the door quietly behind him.

He went to the front door and shouted, "Who the fuck is it?"

"It's Bronson, mate! Let me in!"

Draco groaned again before opening the door a crack. "What the hell do you -?"

Bronson pushed the door all the way open and let himself inside. His face was glowing as he held what looked like a magazine in his hands. "I knew it! I bloody knew it, Malfoy!"

"Knew what?" asked Draco while rubbing at his groggy eyes.

"I *knew* I recognized your little houseguest when she came here the other week and I thought it was weird when I never heard her leave. But, hey, I know how this bloody works. Don't ask questions, right? But then, last night, I just knew! I bloody fucking knew she wasn't just *any* girl. She was someone. And now I have proof!"

Bronson held up the magazine, opened to a page and showed it to Draco. The article was written during the events of the Triwizard Tournament in their fourth year, and there were three photos accompanying it. One of Harry Potter, one of Viktor Krum, and one of Hermione Granger. Draco went white.

"Don't you dare tell me it's not her because I *know*! I bloody know, Malfoy! You're

hiding Harry Potter's Muggle-born girlfriend in your flat! I mean … *damn*. That's intense."

"Ha! Potter fucking wishes she was!" said Draco without thinking. He winced. Crap.

Bronson grinned. "Is that a yes then?"

"I didn't say that. Why the hell do you even have this?" asked Draco, taking the magazine from Bronson's hands.

"Quigley has every copy of *Witch Weekly* and the *Prophet* since like 1984. He's always been a bit obsessed with that Skeeter woman. When he has withdrawals, he pulls out old issues and reads them."

"You told fucking Quigley about this?" shouted Draco, turning red in the face. "I thought I told you fucking not to!"

"Relax, Malfoy. Quigley isn't even home. Stayed at some new broad's place last night. I haven't even seen him."

"Get the fuck out of here, Bronson." Draco tossed the magazine back at him and began to turn away.

"No!" Bronson said firmly. "Some weird shit has been going on here for a while now and I want to know what it is! You know you can trust me, Malfoy. I have never once given you a reason not to."

"Until now. Don't stick your fucking nose where it doesn't belong, 'less you want to get yourself killed."

"Yeah, well, I risk my life everyday by living here, don't I? Just tell me."

"No."

"Come on!"

"NO! Get the fuck out -"

"Dammit, Malfoy! I want to know what the hell is -"

Just then, the door to the guestroom opened and Hermione walked out. She went right over to Bronson, whose jaw had hit the floor, and took the copy of *Witch Weekly* out of his hands, opened to the correct page and looked closely at the

photos on it. She sighed.

"Bronson, is it?" she said, looking up to meet his eyes.

"Y-yes." He paused. "Holy fuck. I was right?"

"Granger, what the hell are you doing out here?" asked Draco, looking livid.

"He already saw me, Malfoy."

"Well, he *obviously* didn't get a clear view of you, or else he wouldn't bloody be here questioning it."

"Clear enough that he found my photo from nearly eight years ago."

Draco took several deep breaths through his nose. "I was taking care of it, Granger," he said through gritted teeth.

"Yes, because your 'get the fuck out' approach was working *really* well." She rolled her eyes.

"Stop fucking doing that!"

"Doing what?"

"That bloody eye roll thing! You do it all the fucking time and it's annoying!"

Hermione crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Well, maybe if you stopped giving me reasons to roll my eyes then it wouldn't bother you so much!"

"Stop. Fucking. Doing. It."

"I'll stop rolling my eyes just as soon as you stop using so many obscenities."

Bronson chuckled, which caused Draco to glare at him. He shut his mouth quickly.

"Why are you being so snippy?" asked Hermione.

*Because you were holding my hand*, he thought.

"Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed or something?"

*No. I woke up on YOUR bed.* "No. I'm just … fucking annoyed that you came out here."

Hermione let out a deep, frustrated breath. She opened her mouth to say something but, before she could …

"Do you mind if I put this little tiff of yours on hold for a moment and ask a really important question?" asked Bronson, stepping between the witch and wizard, who had begun to edge towards one another.

"What?" they both asked, snapping their heads to look at him.

"Perhaps this isn't the time for this, but I just have to know."

They waited.

"Are *you* the cupcake girl?"

Both Draco and Hermione's brows furrowed and lips sneered as they stared at Bronson like he was the biggest idiot in the world.

"Is that a yes?"

Hermione could not help but roll her eyes again. She gave Draco a sharp look before he could say anything.

"Look, Bronson, let me level with you," she said, now focusing her sole attention on him and trying to ignore the annoying git also in the room. "I really didn't want to go down this road, but your incessant need to meddle in our business has given me no choice."

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. She tried hard not to notice.

"Malfoy told me about what he did for you."

Bronson suddenly became pale and looked as if he was going to vomit. "He di -?"

"So I need you to know that if you ever blab about my being here, he has kept copies of all of your original identification papers -"

Bronson's jaw dropped dramatically.

"- and he will not hesitate to turn you in if you ever decide to betray our trust. Do you understand?"

Mouth still agape, Bronson nodded slowly.

No longer being able to resist the urge, Hermione looked at Draco. He was

smirking at her almost proudly. Of course, it was not true. Keeping evidence like that lying around would have been idiotic and dangerous for everyone involved, but Bronson did not need to know that.

"All right then. I am glad to see we are all on the same page." Hermione looked back down at the copy of *Witch Weekly* she was holding and frowned. "It was a pleasure meeting you." She headed to her room -

"Umm … I sort of need -"

- and shut the door.

"- that back."

"If you get a chance, I am also going to need the July 1993 issue of the *Daily Prophet*!" she called through the door.

Draco laughed and said, "I don't believe you'll be getting it back, mate." He took Bronson's shoulder and guided the flabbergasted wizard towards the front door. "She's a piece of work, I know. And really hard to get used to."

"How … here?" Bronson pointed at the floor.

"You walked here just now. Do you not recall?"

Bronson glared at him. "You know what -"

"The fewer questions you ask the better." Draco opened the door and used Bronson's shoulder to push him out. "And remember, tell *no one*." And then he slammed it.

"So is she the cupcake girl?" he heard Bronson call from the other side.

Draco did not answer. He headed towards the guestroom and opened the door without knocking.

Hermione's head shot up as he entered. She was sitting with her legs crossed on the bed, the copy of *Witch Weekly* held comfortably in her lap. "Merlin, Malfoy! What if I had been changing?"

"Into what? Different pajamas?"

"Funny," she said with a frown before looking back down at the article.

"You all right?" he asked, taking a step into the room.

"Fine." Her frown deepened. "I just … miss Harry. It's been so long I'd almost forgotten what he looked like. I wonder if he looks different now. Have you seen him at all? Since the war?" She looked at him hopefully.

"No," he said honestly. "No Death Eater has. He stays hidden."

"That doesn't sound like him," she said, looking at the magazine again. "And Ron?"

"I've seen Weasel several times. He looks the same." Draco thought about this. "Well … angrier."

"Hmm …" Hermione stared at the magazine for a moment longer before standing up and propping it against a figurine on the dresser. It was opened to the page with Harry's photo on it. "Do you have Death Eater duties today?" she asked.

Draco cringed at the way she said that. So casually. "Yes."

Her eyes moved to the small clock he had given her. "You're running late again. Should I make breakfast while you shower?"

"If that's what you want."

"I suppose I'll take that as a yes," she said, eyeing him curiously. "You're acting very strangely today."

Draco was taken aback. "No, I'm n -"

"Is this because I asked you to stay last night?" Hermione blushed as she avoided his eyes.

Draco blinked. "Uhh …"

"Look, I'm sorry if that was … weird or inappropriate in any way. I just …" She sighed. "I needed someone last night and … well, you were here. That's all."

Draco pursed his lips. Well, that hurt more than expected. "It's fine, Granger. No need to get your knickers all in a twist."

Hermione lifted her eyes and looked at him.

"I know what a fucking vulnerable girl looks like. How do you think I get so many back here?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"I'm just saying I know the bloody signs and I wasn't going to leave you alone if you didn't want to be. No need to read so much into it. I'm not acting weird."

"But you kind of are."

"Am not!"

Hermione blinked several times before smiling softly. "Fine, Malfoy. You're acting completely normal." She looked at the clock again. "If you get in the shower now, you'll still have time to sit down and eat. Shall I make pancakes?" She walked forward and pushed past him, heading for the kitchen. "Shower, Malfoy!" she called when she noticed he hadn't moved.

"Bloody fine," said Draco, fiddling with his wand in his pocket. He wanted to lend it to her, but something inside of his head was still blocking him. So, instead, he moved his free hand into his other pocket, where Flint's wand was, and pulled it out. He walked into the kitchen and handed it to her. "Here," he said. "You can use it this once. Then I'm disposing of it."

Hermione slowly reached out and took it from him. She looked at it closely while stroking it, only then realizing that this wand had, at one time, been used to torture her. "Thanks," she said.

Draco left then and headed for his shower. Hermione stared at the wand for a long while before eventually putting it on the counter and continuing her cooking without it. One of these days, she was going to overcome everything that had happened to her. But not today.

<center>XXX</center>

When Draco got home that evening, he was not surprised to find Hermione sitting on the sofa, not doing much more than twiddling her thumbs. How she wasn't going insane in here was beyond him. He walked right up to her and tossed a book he held onto her lap.

"Here," he said.

Hermione lifted it and read the title. *Complex Conundrums*. "What is this?" she asked, looking up at him.

"It's a book of riddles and brainteasers meant to challenge your mind. I thought it might help you sharpen yours a bit. To get you back to where you were."

Hermione tilted her head and eyed him peculiarly. "You bought this for me?"

"Obviously," said Draco, taking out his pack of cigarettes and readying one in his mouth. "My mind's still solid."

Hermione smiled and looked back down at the book, running her fingers across the spine and cover. It was one more thing that was hers. "Do you think the next time you buy me something, you can pick me up some new knickers? I'm really sick of wearing whatever it is those girls you bring home leave behind."

"I refuse to let you wear granny pants, Granger. The knickers stay." Draco winked before heading for the balcony.

Hermione frowned as she wrapped her blanket around her shoulders and followed him out. Sitting down in her usual corner, she opened the book to the first page. This chapter was titled, *Bogglers for Beginners*.

"Let's hear it," said Draco, using his wand to light his cigarette.

Hermione cleared her throat and read the first one aloud. "*I am lighter than a feather, yet no man can hold me for very long. What am I*?"

"Breath," they both answered. That was easy enough.

"*Feed me and I live, give me something to drink and I'll die. What am I*?"

"Fire," they both said again.

"Skip a few chapters, Granger. Your mind's not that fucking damaged."

She flipped through the pages until she came across chapter five, *Medial Mysteries*. That sounded all right. For the most part, Hermione did not have a problem with the riddles. Occasionally, it would take her a minute and Draco would get frustrated waiting for her to come up with the answer, but he always waited. And then Hermione came across one she didn't like.

"*This thing all things devours: Birds, beasts, trees, flowers; Gnaws iron, bites steel; Grinds hard stones to meal; Slays king, ruins town, And beats high mountain down*." She slammed the book shut.

"What? Don't know the answer?" asked Draco, taking a drag of his cigarette.

"No, I know the answer is 'time'," she said. "I just … don't like it. It's a bit of a harsh reality."

"That 'time' devours things?" He cocked an eyebrow. "How is that harsh?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of how quickly it devours things." Hermione fidgeted with one of the corners of the book.

"The world's not devoured yet, Granger. Give it some 'time'." Draco winked as he leaned back in his chair and took another drag. "So, listen."

Hermione lifted her head.

"I have to head to my father's tomorrow."

Hermione tried hard not to react at the mention of Lucius. If Draco noticed, he did not let on.

"To pick something up. And with all of these damn restrictions the Dark Lord insists on having, the only way for me to get there is by broom."

"So you won't have enough 'time' to get there and back by evening," she finished with a faint smile. "Meaning, I'll be on my own for the night."

"I was actually thinking of inviting Bronson to stay here."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "To babysit me?"

Draco smirked. "If you hadn't pulled a runner last night -"

"I'm not going to do that again! I'm fine on my own, Malfoy. I don't need -"

"I would feel more comfortable leaving if I knew someone was here. With a wand, you know? In case of emergencies."

"I'll be fine without -"

"I already asked him on my way up here," said Draco. "He's ecstatic. Cannot wait to spend time with the famous Hermione Granger."

Hermione frowned and hugged the book to her chest. "I loathe you."

"I'm starting to consider that a compliment."

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Hermione sat on the sofa with her arms crossed while Bronson sat on the other side, all smiles as he watched her closely. He had so many questions and it was

starting to give her a headache.

"So where have you been since the war? How'd you end up here with Malfoy? Are you the reason there are all of these restrictions on the city? What's your favorite color? Why don't you have a wand? Do you like pasta? Do you like cupcakes? Are you the cupcake girl? If so, why didn't you like Malfoy's cupcake? What's Harry Potter like?"

She answered none but the last, stating, "The less you know, the better." But that did not stop her from talking about how good and kind Harry was, making her miss him even more, if at all possible.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" said Bronson, grabbing his overnight bag from beside the sofa and unzipping it. "Quigley will kill me if he ever finds out any of this stuff is missing but, I assume, this is the July 1993 issue you were talking about?"

He handed her an old copy of the *Daily Prophet* and Hermione took it.

"I believe what you're looking for is on page five."

Hermione opened up to page five, her heart skipping a beat as she came face-to-face with the entire Weasley family, alive and well while on their vacation in Egypt just before her third year. A tear slid down her cheek. She was quick to wipe it away before it could drip onto the newspaper and smudge the ink.

"Am I that transparent?" she asked with a slight chuckle.

"Not until I found it. One glance through and it was pretty obvious what you wanted." Bronson pursed his lips as she continued to stare down at the photo. "How long has it been since you've seen him?"

"Four years and five months tomorrow," she said. Counting the days had now become a regular thing for her.

Bronson raised the eyebrows. "Since the war?"

Hermione nodded.

"I had heard you went missing shortly after it, but I hadn't realized you had never been found. Were you being held prisoner or something? Did Malfoy help you escape?"

"Not exactly," she said, stroking the cheerful face of Mrs. Weasley. "I'm not going to tell you anything, Bronson, so you can stop trying." She paused. "Is that your

real name?"

"It's my real surname," he said.

"What's your first name?"

Bronson grunted. "Something I loathe."

"So does that mean you won't tell me?" asked Hermione, looking up and giving him sad, puppy-dog eyes.

He grunted again. "You won't start calling me it, will you?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

"All right, *fine*." He rolled his eyes slightly. "It's Baldric."

Hermione let a chuckle slip out but quickly threw her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry. That's … well, it's very lovely." She chuckled again.

"There! You see? *This* is why I never tell anyone!"

"No, no! Ignore me. Baldric is a very nice name." Another chuckle. "And I do enjoy the irony since you have such an abundant head of hair."

"Thank you," said Bronson, running a hand through his thick, chestnut locks.

Even though romance was the furthest thing from Hermione's mind right now, she was also not blind. She was fully aware that Bronson was not bad to look at. He had that hair, obviously. It looked so soft and she was tempted to reach out and stroke it, and it was accompanied by olive skin and muddy-green eyes. Not to mention that smile. It could make any heart melt. But she had a sinking feeling that she was not his type.

"So what's *his* story?" asked Bronson, looking at the photo in Hermione's hands and pointing at Charlie Weasley. "He play for my team?"

Well, *that* confirmed it. Definitely not his type. "Not that I know of," she said honestly. "I've never known Charlie to have a girlfriend but I always saw him as more androgynous than anything."

Bronson cocked an eyebrow. "Come again?"

Hermione smiled. "It just means that he's more interested in dragons than

relationships. With a girl *or* boy."

"Not once I'm through with him." He laughed.

Hermione shyly looked down at her fidgety hands. Bronson could not help but notice.

"Don't tell me you spend all of your time with Malfoy and you're shy when it comes to sex? How the hell does that work?"

Hermione blushed. "Not well."

"That wizard really has no shame. Most nights, we can hear him and his latest conquest all the way down in our flat."

Hermione crinkled her nose. "You can?"

"Why the hell do you think we always keep the music so loud? Two floors and all windows closed means nothing when that boy's going at it." Bronson snorted. "Tell me he at least puts a Silencing Charm on your room when he brings someone over. Obviously, he doesn't put one on his own."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "He says that *You-Know-Who* checks his wand every morning, so he can't cast spells that look suspicious."

"Oh, what a load of rubbish!"

Hermione's eyes shot up. "You mean he doesn't check?"

"No! Of course he does!" Bronson said defensively. "But Malfoy is his current favorite. Any lie he feeds him, he'll eat right up."

"Did Malfoy tell you he was You-Know-Who's favorite?"

"No. He's not exactly the type to brag about something like that. But he's in charge."

"In charge?" she repeated.

"Of the other Death Eaters," said Bronson. "Malfoy's the one who barks out orders. And, every time You-Know-Who has a bloody gathering the whole city is required to attend, Malfoy is *always* standing just behind him. Him and that fucking aunt bitch of his. *Bellatrix.* I can't tell you how many times he's sent her on what are supposed to be suicide missions, only to have her come back unscathed. I

wouldn't be surprised if she's sold her fucking soul to the devil for eternal life or something, considering all of the crap she's survived without a scratch."

Hermione stared at him, unblinking.

"He's really never told you any of this?"

She shook her head slowly.

"You and Malfoy don't know each other very well, do you?"

"No. We don't know each other at all," she said honestly.

"So what have the two of you been doing here for the past two weeks? Bloody staring at each other without a word passing between you or something?"

Hermione pursed her lips in thought. Huh. What *did* they talk about? Their conversations were certainly never about him. Every time she tried to get something out of him, he would turn it back on her.

"Can we change the subject?" she asked, putting the newspaper down on the coffee table. "So were you just teasing me with your pasta talk earlier, or do you really know how to make it?"

"Only spaghetti," said Bronson with a smile.

Hermione smiled back. "Sounds perfect."

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Draco sat on a white, stone bench in the middle of the Malfoy family graveyard, staring blankly at the unmarked grave in front of him. The cold air stung his wet cheeks, only adding to the horrible ambiance that haunted this place. After the war, he could not move out of the manor fast enough, and he had only been back a handful of times since. And always to see her. His mother. Buried without a tombstone out of fear that the Dark Lord would decimate her remains for betraying him.

Draco had dug the grave for her with his bare hands when his father had ordered him to come back here with her body. Just before he had dragged Hermione away, dooming her to the horrible life of slavery that almost destroyed her. But she was strong, Draco knew she was. That was why she was doing so much better than others who had suffered the same fate. Sure, she had her moments of insanity, but those were to be expected. You could not endure years of torture and come

out untouched. It just was not possible.

Eyes still on the disturbed dirt that covered his mother's shallow grave, Draco mindlessly took a cigarette out of his pocket and used his wand to light it.

"Draco?" a voice called from behind him.

Without turning around, Draco blew the smoke out through his lips and slowly said, "Hello, Father."

"What are you doing here? The house-elf did not alert me of your arrival."

"Probably because he hasn't seen me. Your house-elf is a *he*, isn't it?"

"What? Why in the name of Salazar does that matter?"

"Just answer the question," said Draco, taking another drag of his cigarette.

"I believe it is, yes," said Lucius, stepping closer. He took a good look at his son. "Take that dreadful thing out of your mouth, Draco! What if the Dark Lord found out you were smoking that?"

"How would he find out?" asked Draco with a light smile. He took another drag. "Are you going to tell on me, Father?"

"Of course not!" shouted Lucius, turning red in the face. "Do not think just because you are the Dark Lord's current favorite that you are exempt from the rules. It will not last forever, Draco. You cannot afford to make any mistakes."

"You mean like you?" said Draco, finally turning to his father with narrowed eyes. "I'm not fucking stupid. I know better than to repeat *your* mistakes."

Lucius' face softened as he stared back at his son. "Draco, I -"

"Leave me be, Father. I only came here to visit with Mother and I would like some time alone with her, if you don't mind."

Lucius gave him a shallow nod and moved to leave. "Will you be staying?"

"With the bloody curfew on the city, it seems like I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

"So does that mean they haven't found the Granger gir -" Lucius stopped and sighed. "Potter's Mudblood yet?"

"You actually remember her name?" Draco asked curiously.

Lucius said nothing.

"No, they haven't." But he had. "I don't know why we're wasting our time. She's probably halfway back to Potter by now, if not there already."

"It would be impossible for her to travel like that. Someone must be helping her."

"Someone with a death wish." Draco had to laugh.

"If I had to venture a guess, I would say she hasn't even left the city. You should have your Death Eaters search every home."

"Who bloody cares?" said Draco, taking another drag of his cigarette. "The whole point of keeping her was to lure Potter out and, in over four years, he has never come looking for her. Not once."

"He's sent others."

"Failures. Every last one of them. If we want to lure Potter out, she's not the answer. We're wasting our fucking time."

"Draco, I surely hope you have not spoken like this to the Dark Lor -"

"Of course I fucking haven't!" shouted Draco. "But it's the truth! Now, leave me. I'll see you for dinner."

Lucius nodded again and left without another word.

Draco sat there mindlessly, staring at his mother's grave for a long while, only finally standing when the first drops of rain landed on his face.

He dropped his cigarette that had burned out long ago and walked over to her, putting his hands in his pockets as he tried hard to remember her face.

"I've done something foolish, Mother. Something that will probably cost me my life. I don't …" Draco gulped to relieve his raw throat … "I don't want your death to have been in vain. You risked your life to save mine and, now, I'm doing the same for someone else. Please, don't hate me for it, Mother. I'm just so sick of this life. A life I know you never wanted for me."

He reached up and wiped at his wet eyes, a mixture of cold rain and hot tears.

"You once told me a secret. I was very small and you told me that you secretly celebrated the first time the Dark Lord was defeated. Because you did not like what a taste of his power did to Father. I won't let the same thing happen to me that happened to him. That is why I must do this. Even if I die. I'm … I'm tired of being afraid."

Draco took a step closer, pulled one hand out of his pocket and held it over where her heart would be.

"*Accio wand.*"

There was a slight rumble in the ground before something eventually dug itself out of his mother's grave and flew into his hand like a magnet. It was a wand. The same wand he had taken off of someone's dead body amidst the chaos of the war. Just before his mother returned his to him. He had hidden it here for no reason really, other than he had no use for it at the time. But he always knew he wanted to hold onto it. Just in case the time came when he might need it.

In these current times, it was next to impossible to find a wand that was not already registered. This just might be the last one out there.

"Thanks for keeping this safe for me, Mother. The witch I'm giving it to will put it to good use. I'm sorry I lost yours and left you without one. You know I would change a lot of things about that day if I could."

The light drizzle steadily sped up to a heavy downpour. Draco looked up and watched as a streak of lightning lit up the sky, accompanied by a loud roar of thunder.

"I don't know when I'll be able to visit again, but I love you, Mother. I look forward to the day I can put a tombstone here for you."

Draco bent down, kissed his hand and touched it to the dirt.

"Soon. I will avenge you soon."

He stood back up and slowly walked towards the backdoor to his childhood home. The house-elf met him there with some dry clothes already in hand.

"Dinker has already made up your old room for you, Young Master," said the elf, putting the clothes down and using a towel to help dry Draco off.

"Thank you," said Draco, looking closely and finally coming to the decision that the elf was, in fact, a 'he'. "Tell me something, Dinker. Has … has a young woman

ever stayed here? Perhaps in the cellar?"

"No woman has stayed here in many years, Young Master."

"How many?"

"Dinker, my son is quite capable of drying himself. Please, continue with dinner," said Lucius, walking into the room.

"Y-yes Master." The house-elf ran quickly towards the kitchen.

As soon as he was gone, Lucius asked, "What were you saying to him?"

"Nothing," said Draco, walking towards the drawing room. "I'm pulling out the good brandy."

After dinner, Draco excused himself to his room, only to sneak off to the cellar on his way there. He had a horrible feeling that he simply could not shake. Hermione acted strange at the mere mention of his father. Of course, she had every right to hate him. It was his final decision that forced her into slavery, but it just seemed more than that to Draco. The way she looked at him while waking up from her nightmares … fear and hatred pouring out of her as she stared into the eyes that could very well belong to someone else.

Draco descended the stairs and began walking around the dark, open space.

"*Lumos*!"

He did not know what he was looking for. Just some small sign that she was here, but there was nothing. If there was ever any part of Hermione in this cellar, it was long gone now. He had kept pretty good track of her over the years, but not always. There were times, especially in the beginning, when he had absolutely no idea where she was. But, from what he understood, his father had never owned a slave. Just like him. Because the Malfoys never just took women. They made them theirs. As it should be.

With a heavy sigh, Draco let the light go out on his wand and headed back towards the stairs. He opened the door and left the cellar behind, just missing the scratches low on the wall beside it. A person's desperate attempt to keep track of the days while imprisoned here. Back when time still mattered to them. And when they still had hope that they would one day be saved.

XXX

Draco left the next morning at the first signs of light and began the long flight home. He did not even bother to say goodbye to his father.

The Dementors and patrolling Death Eaters let him back into the city without so much as a second glance. One of the few benefits of being the Dark Lord's right-hand wizard. Anyone else would have been checked and then punished for trying to sneak in an unregistered wand.

Draco landed beside his building and took a moment outside by himself. He rarely got those anymore since Hermione reentered his life. Even when he tried to escape for a moment of peace on the balcony, she always followed him. He understood she was lonely, but it was starting to get bloody annoying.

After a few breaths, the rain began to come down again. He ran inside and up the stairs to the fifth floor. As he approached his front door, he could hear some strange sounds coming from inside. A flash of panic running through his head, Draco hurried to unlock the door and burst into his flat.

Both Hermione and Bronson's heads shot up to look at him. They were in the kitchen and he appeared to be teaching her how to make an omelet. She had his wand in her hand and both were smiling, the faint remnants of a laugh still vibrating on her lips. It was the first genuine laugh he had seen since she got here. And Bronson was the one to make it happen. Now, why did *that* irk him?

"OI! Malfoy! You're home early."

"Uhuh," he said, eyeing the two of them curiously. "It was not a leisurely visit."

"Should we make you an omelet, mate? Hermione's getting pretty good at them. Course, she burnt the first three."

Draco was not blind to the way Hermione smiled at the sound of her name.

"No, that won't be necessary," he said, kicking off his shoes and putting his broom in the closet. "I'm tired and want my own fucking bed."

He walked towards his room. Noticing Hermione's bedroom door was open, Draco peeked inside and saw that her bed was untouched. She did make it every day, but never first thing. He grunted, opened his own door and slammed it behind him.

"He's always so bright and cheery in the morning," said Bronson, completely unfazed by Draco's rude demeanor.

"Granger, get the fuck in here!" Draco's voice called from his room a moment later.

"The princess is beckoning you. Better hurry." Bronson laughed as Hermione handed him back his wand.

She frowned and groaned before walking over to Draco's door and opening it cautiously. "You called?" she said, only poking her head in.

"All the way in, Granger. And shut the door behind you."

Hermione did as he instructed, but still hung near her only exit as a precaution. "Is everything all right, Malfoy?"

Draco waved his wand, putting up what Hermione immediately recognized as a Silencing Charm. She groaned again. Well, she might as well brace herself for the yelling. She crossed her arms and waited.

"What the fuck was that?" he said the moment the charm was in place.

"What was what?" she asked, holding his fiery gaze with her own.

"*That*! *That*!" Draco pointed at the door. "Whatever the fuck *that* was I just walked in on!"

Hermione crinkled her brow and said, "What? You mean my omelet?"

"Don't play fucking dumb! I *know* you know what I'm talking about!"

She crinkled her brow further. "Bronson?"

"*Obviously*!"

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "He was just teaching me how to make an omelet. Is that so terrible?"

Draco's nostrils flared. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths to calm himself. "Look, I know you've made this bloody decision for the two of us to trust him, but that doesn't mean you should *ever* let your guard down."

"I haven't." Hermione uncrossed her arms and pulled the sleeves of her jumper over her hands. It was always so cold in here. "You're the one who asked him to stay here, remember?"

"Yes, but I don't recall telling you to get so bloody chummy with him!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "I'm sorry, but what did you expect? You threw me

into a flat with a wizard I hardly knew for an entire night. Merlin knows I get enough awkward silences with you, and Bronson is pretty impossible to hate. Besides, you trust him. Why shouldn't I?"

"Who says I bloody trust him?"

"Well, you wouldn't have asked him to stay here if you didn't. And he certainly knows more about you than I do."

Draco went red. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Nothing," said Hermione, turning her head and staring at a spot on the wall.

"Granger, don't you fucking go spacing out on me in the middle of our conversation!"

Hermione's head snapped back.

"What did Bronson tell you about me?"

"Nothing," she said again.

"So you like him then?"

"Yes, he's very nice."

"Don't be fucking stupid, Granger! You are in hiding! This is no time for you to be going bloody googly-eyed!"

Her brow crinkled again. "What?"

"You wanna shag him!"

Now her brow shot high on her forehead as her eyes went excessively wide. "*What*?"

"That's what you just said!"

"No it's not! How on earth did your deluded ears hear that?"

"Because you said it! You said you like him!"

"As a *person*, Malfoy! Not like that!"

"So you're saying you're not attracted to him?"

"No, that's not … he's decent looking. I'm not going to say he's not. But I'm *hardly* his type."

"So what *is* his type then?"

Hermione instantly thought of Charlie Weasley. She snickered and said, "Red-heads."

Draco crinkled his forehead. Clearly, he did not get the joke.

"He's gay, Malfoy. You know. Likes men …" Her voice trailed off as she stared awkwardly off to the side.

A pause.

"He is?" asked Draco, looking absolutely baffled.

"Oh, yes." She snickered again. "You really didn't know?"

Draco's face calmed a little as he slowly shook his head. "So then … he and Quigley -"

"No, Malfoy. Quigley likes *women*. It is possible for a gay man to have a male flatmate who isn't his lover."

Draco cringed. "Don't say that."

"What? *Lover*?"

He cringed again. "Stop it."

Hermione crossed her arms again and chuckled.

Draco looked over at her and felt a strange sense of satisfaction. She had laughed, and because of something *he* did. Not Bronson. Fucking prick.

"So did you really just call me in here to act all fatherly, or was there a point to all of this?"

"Well, someone fucking has to. Can't have you go jumping into the sheets with the first wizard to cross your path since escaping your former life."

"Technically, that would be *you*." Hearing what she had just said back in her head, Hermione blushed and cleared her throat. "There is really no need, Malfoy. I

already have a father, and he raised me better than that."

"Hopefully, you have a father," he said flatly.

Hermione's face dropped. "What?"

One look at her and Draco immediately regretted what he had said. He really needed to learn to hold his tongue. "No, Granger, I didn't mean -"

"What did you want, Malfoy?" she asked, looking at the ground and clenching her fists so tight they turned white, obviously trying very hard not to cry.

"I … I brought you something," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the wand. Hermione did not look up, so he walked over to her and touched her fist, easing her fingers a bit before slipping it into them.

Hermione looked down at it in shock. "Where did you get this?"

"It's the wand I grabbed during the war, before my mother gave me mine back."

"You … you kept it?"

"I hid it," said Draco. "I always knew I might need it one day. And, now, it's yours."

"Mine," she said slowly, carefully tracing the woodwork of the wand with her free hand.

Hermione smiled and then, very unexpectedly, reached out and hugged Draco. He was a bit stunned for a moment, before finally letting his arms wrap around her.

"Is this weird?" she asked, but without making any attempt to let him go.

"Yes," he answered honestly. "But it all is, isn't it?"

He could feel her bushy-haired head nod against him. Eventually, she pulled away and smiled coyly. "Get some sleep, Malfoy. You're no fun when you're grumpy."

"I'm always grumpy."

"Yes, I know." Hermione opened the door and slipped back out to the front of the flat.

"Took you long enough," said Bronson without looking up from the plates he was garnishing on the set table. "I was afraid he might have murdered you or something."

The use of that word immediately wiped the smile from her face. *Murder*. "He would never," she said defensively.

"I was only joking," said Bronson with a smile. "So what did he want?"

"Just to give me something." Hermione took a seat at the table and put the wand down beside her. She had thought about hiding it, but then she realized she had no pockets.

"That's yours?" he asked, pointing at it.

Hermione smiled and nodded.

Bronson laughed. "Figures. Only Malfoy could ever get an unregistered wand in the middle of this dark world. You definitely found the right Death Eater's flat to hide in."

For the first time in two weeks, Hermione was starting to suspect that this was true.

After breakfast, Bronson left, but not before promising to come back and visit her soon. When he was gone, Hermione made herself comfortable in her blanket on the sofa, with the book Draco had given her in her lap. Every few minutes or so, she would catch herself looking up and staring at Draco's door. It was several hours before he finally came out of it, a cigarette already ready in his mouth. He went to the balcony and motioned with his head for her to follow. She did just that.

# Chapter 6: Blackbird

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Pretty much every day for the next week, Draco came home to find Bronson there with Hermione. Gay or not, he did not like the amount of attention he was giving her.

Surely Quigley was starting to wonder why his flatmate was never around anymore. But when he asked him about it, all Bronson said was, "Nah. He's been seeing this new broad for a couple of weeks now and spends most of his nights at her place. Bloody curfew, you know?" And then he looked at Hermione and winked.

On this particular day, Draco walked in to find them both sitting on the sofa, leaning in towards something that seemed to be talking on the coffee table.

"Evening, mate."

"Malfoy, look what Bronson got me at the Black Market," said Hermione, holding up what he could now see was a small radio. "Did you know that Potterwatch is still a thing?"

"Careful, Hermione," said Bronson. "You don't want to go blabbing all of the resistances secrets to the big, scary Death Eater."

"I am already fully aware of the broadcast," said Draco, taking off his shoes. "Did you steal my money to purchase this bloody thing too?"

Hermione and Bronson looked at each other and laughed. "A girl needs her own knickers, mate. She shouldn't be forced to wear ones that belonged to your random slags."

"*Thank you*!" said Hermione. "And if you're going to be angry at anyone for that,

Malfoy, it should be me. I'm the one that gave him your money to get them for me."

"Yes, and I would still like to know how you knew where I kept it."

"Well, you didn't exactly make it difficult. Sock drawer, Malfoy? Really? If you don't want me to take it then find a better hiding place."

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. "You're both getting too bloody comfortable here."

Hermione and Bronson looked at each other and laughed again.

"Don't worry. I bought it with my own money, mate," said Bronson. "I *do* have some, you know?"

"Whatever." Draco groaned and headed for his room.

Hermione stood and followed him. "Malfoy, I wanted to ask you something," she said, shutting the door behind her.

"Make it quick," he said, taking off his cloak. "I'm supposed to go meet Theo for a drink tonight."

"Well, I haven't had much of a chance to use this wand since you gave it to me," she took it out of her pocket, "and I was hoping to get some practice with it."

"So practice." Draco began digging through his drawers for some clean clothes.

"I mean *really* practice, Malfoy. Like, for a war."

He stopped what he was doing and slowly looked over at her.

"You told me before that the only people who live in this building are you, Bronson and Quigley. So I had Bronson go and check to see if there's a basement. There is and he says it's pretty well-sized. He cleared the space and says it will be perfect for -"

"No."

Hermione huffed. "Why not?"

"It's not safe for you to leave the flat."

"But it's not like I'll be leaving the building. I'm not going to be staying here forever, Malfoy. I need to prepare!"

"Just practice here."

"There's not enough space! Malfoy, please. Will you just look at it?"

Draco straightened up and crossed his arms. "Have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Have you 'looked at it'?"

"No, of course not," she said. "I was waiting for you."

Draco knew instantly that she was telling the truth. It was impossible to miss the lies in eyes like hers.

"Fine, Granger. I'll look."

Those same eyes immediately lit up. "Really?"

"I just said it, didn't I?"

"Yes, I just … figured you would put up more of a fight."

"I can if you would like."

"No, no! This is fine!" Hermione reopened the door. "Now?"

Draco smirked and followed her out to the front of the flat.

"He says he'll see it, Bronson!"

"Excellent," said Bronson, standing up and heading towards the door.

Draco went and put his shoes back on, then looked over at Hermione, who was watching him closely. "Is Quigley home?" he asked Bronson.

"No. He's on a date with that broad."

"Good," said Draco, eyes still focused on Hermione. "You coming then?"

Hermione stared at him blankly for a moment before nodding slowly. She went to the closet, pulled out her tattered boots and slipped them on. Bronson stared down at them and frowned.

Draco opened the door and Bronson slipped out first. Draco then looked back at

Hermione, who was staring hesitantly out of it.

"Do you want me to hold your fucking hand or something, Granger?"

Hermione bit her bottom lip. "I know you're being sarcastic but …"

Before she even had a chance to finish, Draco held out his hand. Hermione stared at it for a moment before slipping hers into it, suddenly feeling the urge to intertwine their fingers for the first time.

Draco did not even flinch as she did this, squeezing her hand tight and pulling her out the door. Bronson led the way down to the basement and proudly showed them around the large space. It was dark down here and smelled a bit musty, but one wave from Hermione's unregistered wand and a lovely floral scent took over. Draco realized immediately that it smelled like her, and then he wondered how she managed to emit the aroma of flowers when using *his* bathing products. It must have just been natural.

Bronson watched closely as the two of them walked around the basement, noticing how close Hermione always stood to Draco and that their hands never once became unclasped. Peculiar.

"So what do you think?" asked Hermione once Draco had taken a good look around.

"Well … I can understand why this might be a better place to practice, but I just don't feel comfortable with you coming down here without me."

"It really is fine, mate," said Bronson. "I'll look after her. And I'll make sure we only come down here when Quigley isn't around."

Draco eyed him suspiciously. "I don't get you. Why are you so willing to sacrifice so much of your free time for someone you don't even know?"

"Why are you?" Bronson retorted.

Draco said nothing, but he did finally let go of Hermione's hand.

"Look, Malfoy, I want this fucking war to end just as much as you do. You *know* that. And you're not the only one who hates bloody You-Know-Who. You're just the only one who hates him while fucking working for him, *and* housing refugees on the side. My wanting to help Hermione makes a hell of a lot more sense than *your* wanting to help her."

Draco narrowed his eyes and said, "Fine. If this is what you want, Granger, then I can't bloody stop you now, can I? We are both already fully aware that if I say no you'll just fucking go behind my back and do it."

Hermione frowned. The thought had crossed her mind.

"Just don't be stupid about it."

"I won't," she said.

"You better not," he said sternly. "Now, let's get the fuck out of here. I still have to change before I go out."

Draco reached his hand back towards her. Hermione took it, letting him lead her out of the basement and back up the stairs. Bronson followed closely behind them, still staring at their entwined hands with a captivated skepticism.

Back in the flat, Draco changed quickly and headed out the door without so much as a goodbye to Hermione. Bronson left at the same time, since he still had a late shift to get to.

"Hey, Malfoy."

"What?" said Draco, pulling out a cigarette and smoking it on his way down the stairs.

"Why haven't you gotten Hermione any clothes?"

"*What*?" Draco repeated, only with even more irritation.

"Well, all she seems to have is pajama bottoms and jumpers of yours. And don't even get me started on those remnants of what I assume were once boots."

Draco grunted. "I don't really have time for this. Just tell me what you're getting at, Bronson."

"It's not fucking rocket science!"

"What the hell is rocket -?"

"Buy-her-some-fucking-clothes! And shoes while you're at it1" Bronson reached his front door and opened it. "Make her feel like a bloody person again!" He stepped inside and slammed the door behind him.

Draco stared at it, dumbfounded for a moment before continuing down the stairs. Somewhere between the second and first floor, he found himself getting angry and ended up hitting the wall. Why the hell did he never think of these things? It was so fucking obvious, but not once had it even crossed his mind to get her clothes. What was she, a fucking house-elf?

"*Fuck*!" Draco shook his hand out. He would be feeling that one in the morning.

When Draco got home later that night, he had his typical random slag with him. After a quick shag on his floor - since they couldn't even make it to the bed before she was plunging herself onto him - he used his usual tricks to get her out the door.

Once that was done, he grabbed his cigarettes and headed for Hermione's room. Since she had started casting Silencing Charms every night, he now just walked right in, seeing as knocking would do no good.

"Balcony, Granger," he said the same way he always did.

Only, this time, he was not met with her usual rustling of sheets, but a whimper instead.

"Granger?"

Draco used his wand to turn on the lights and stepped further into the room. She was lying in the fetal position with the covers tangled around her. The small radio Bronson had given her was currently switched on and set on the nightstand.

"Granger, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head.

Draco went over and sat beside her on the bed. "Well, obviously you're lying."

"No, really, I'm fine. It's just …" She looked at the radio and whimpered again. "I didn't know it was Friday night."

"What?"

She whimpered again. "Bronson told me Ginny always comes on Potterwatch on Friday nights. I just … wasn't expecting to hear her voice. That's all."

Draco turned towards the radio and listened. It was definitely female, but he did not know the youngest Weasley well enough to determine if it was her voice or

not. Although, he very much doubted that Hermione was wrong.

"Ron was there too. They … they dedicated a song to me. Can you believe it?"

Actually, he could. Draco had, of course, listened to Potterwatch before on the orders of the Dark Lord. To see if they would ever reveal Harry's location by accident. They never did. This was not the first time Weasel and Weaselette had been on together, and certainly not the first time he heard them dedicate a song to Hermione. It was always the same one.

"It's a Muggle song called *Blackbird* … and my favorite." She chuckled softly. "I've never appreciated its meaning so much before." With a heavy sigh, she looked at him and said, "I used to play it for them at the Burrow. I don't know how they ever found a copy of it."

Draco did not know what to say. There really were no words for a moment like this, so he, instead, reached down and began stroking his hand through her hair. More tears poured down Hermione's cheeks as she moved her own hand so it was on top of his.

"Will you stay and listen with me? Just until she's gone. Ron already left."

Draco nodded. He moved so he was beside her on the bed and pulled her body tightly against his, hugging her from behind while Ginny continued to talk about everything to do with the resistance. Lives they had taken, lives they had lost, and her suspicions as to why security had been raised in London. The rumor was that Hermione Granger had escaped. Draco and Hermione both laughed at this.

Even when Ginny signed off and there was nothing left but static, Draco did not move. He knew the moment he lied down that he was not going to. He wanted to stay. And just knowing that was killing him inside.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"AHHH!"

The old woman screamed out in horrible agony as Pansy Parkinson hit her with another Cruciatus Curse, her body writhing in unnatural shapes while everyone watched with cold, detached expressions.

"Where …" Pansy gulped. "Where was Granger going?"

"I know nothing!" the old woman shouted. "I admitted to giving her the knife, but that is all I did!"

Pansy began to lower her wand.

"And even if I did know, I would *never* tell you!" she hissed. "That poor girl deserved her freedom!"

"Hit her again, Ms. Parkinson," said a dark, male voice from behind her.

"But I don't think she's lying -"

"I'm sorry, were you under the impression that someone here asked you to think?" spat Bellatrix, stepping forward. "Do as the Dark Lord says. Hit her again."

Pansy glanced sideways at Draco, who was propped on a windowsill while Theo leaned casually against the wall beside him. He gave her a shallow nod.

Pansy turned back to the woman and let out a quiet sigh before shouting, "*Crucio*!"

While the old woman thrashed and screamed on the floor, Bellatrix went up to her and slashed at her with her own knife. "How do you like it, bitch? Now can you imagine the pain my husband must have felt?"

"Is this all really necessary?" said Theo in an almost bored voice. "She makes the best cottage pie. That's why my father and I always take her in. A world without it just seems so … blah."

Draco glanced over at him and successfully fought off an eye roll. Theo had a natural coldness about him that rivaled even Lucius's, and it was only getting worse with age. He hated to admit it, seeing as Theo was his oldest friend and all, but he really was a true Death Eater. Not like him or Pansy. She hated it, only ever becoming one because her father did not have a son to offer to the Dark Lord.

"She has done evil, young Nott," said the Dark Lord, turning his back on the old woman and doing his slithering walk towards the center of the room. "I show no compassion for criminals. You know this." He stopped. "Finish this, Bellatrix. We will not waste our time here a moment longer."

Bellatrix looked down at their next victim and cackled. "Draco, get over here."

Draco stood up from the windowsill and walked over to his aunt.

"Finish her," she demanded.

He began to take his wand out of his pocket, but Bellatrix held out a hand to stop

him.

"Not with that. With this." She slipped the knife into his hand. "Let her know what it feels like to have a knife plunged into her gut. And just a reminder," she said, falling to her knees and pulling the woman by her gray hair up to a seated position, "we will be doing this exact same thing to Potter's little Mudblood the moment we find her."

The old woman spit at her, making Bellatrix flinch before smacking her hard across the face.

"Filthy fucking Mudblood! You will regret trying to contaminate me!"

The woman sneered. "I regret nothing."

Draco's hand shook slightly as he tried hard not to let his mind wander to visions of Hermione being captured. He needed to make sure his aunt never got close enough to lay even one hand on her. Or else her death would surely be a terrible one.

The old woman's eyes moved to his trembling hand. He steadied it quickly.

Bellatrix stepped back and joined Voldemort in the center of the room while Draco crouched down beside the woman.

"Your soul … it's different," she whispered while reaching out to grab his cloak.

"What?" asked Draco, not moving quick enough to avoid her grasp.

Even in this woman's weak state, she still successfully entered his mind with a nonverbal and wandless '*Legilimens*'. Images of Hermione immediately ran through Draco's head.

He pushed her off of him and fell back on his heels, successfully using Occlumency to get her out. When his eyes focused again, she was still sitting there, only now she was smiling. "It's all right," she said softly. "Do what you must. I am not afraid."

Slyly reaching into his pocket, Draco touched his wand and silently cast a Numbing Spell on the woman.

Looking back at her, Draco clenched his eyes shut and quietly mouthed, "I'm sorry," before plunging the knife directly into her heart.

"What the hell are you doing, Draco? Slice her fucking throat open!" Bellatrix screamed from behind him. But it was already too late. The woman was gone, her death pushed on by her own will to die. He could only hope that his spell had worked and she had not felt a thing, but there was no way of knowing for sure.

"Well, I suppose it would be rude of me not to offer you all a piece of her very last cottage pie," said Theo with a frown. "Bloody fucking waste."

"I'll pass," said Draco, walking over to his aunt and handing her back the knife.

"Me too," said Pansy.

"Mmm …" Bellatrix moaned, letting a tiny bit of blood drip on her finger and licking it off. "Don't you just relish in it, Draco?" She smiled wickedly as she smeared one side of the blood-covered knife on his cheek, and then flipping it to smear the remaining side on the other.

"You're fucking twisted," said Draco while wiping at his face. He turned to leave.

"I don't know what you see in him, my lord. The boy is weak."

Draco stopped and clenched his fists. "Don't test me, Bellatrix."

"Draco, please, call me auntie." Another infuriating cackle. "I simply do not know why you keep him so close, my lord. He is not -"

In one swift movement, Draco had his wand out of his pocket and aimed at his aunt. He sent her flying backwards with such force that she smashed right through the window she hit and continued into the garden.

"Now, Draco, my boy. Was that really necessary?" asked Lord Voldemort, looking quite pleased.

"It always is," said Draco, slipping his wand back into his pocket. "I am not weak and I will punish anyone who says otherwise. Never let her put a doubt in your mind about me. My loyalty is here."

"I know where your loyalty lies," said Lord Voldemort, displaying his faint smile that had always greatly disturbed Draco. "Now, young Nott, about that cottage pie."

"It's this way," said Theo, grinning widely at the shattered window before leading the Dark Lord out of the room.

Draco headed for the front door with Pansy closely at his heels. He had barely

walked a block when he realized she was still behind him. "Did you want something, Parkinson?" he asked while turning around.

"I was just … wondering what you're doing tonight."

"Fucking going home to wipe this shit off of me," he said, looking down at the blood that had already dried in his fingernails.

"And after?"

"I don't fucking know. Why?"

"I just … wanted to know if maybe you wanted to come over. You know, spend the night? It's been a while since -"

"No."

Pansy looked at him with sad eyes. "Why not?"

"It's not a good idea."

"But I don't understand. Theo says you shag random slags all the time. Why would you go home with them but not with me?"

"It's not personal."

And that was exactly how Draco liked it. 'Random' made it so it was never personal. It meant detachment, and detachment meant never caring. Draco could care less about himself, and he could never get truly hurt as long as he felt that same way towards everyone else. And Pansy … they had history. That was why he had ended it with her just after the war. Sure, they had shared a few lonely nights since, but the deeper Draco fell into the Dark Lord's world, the more he realized it was a bad idea.

"Goodnight, Pansy," he said before continuing on his way home.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Hermione was lying in her bed with the radio on her stomach when she heard the front door open and slam. Over the past week, she had become accustomed to listening to it, even when there was nothing on. Just in case something important was to happen.

She put it down on the nightstand before getting up and walking out of her room.

Draco's bedroom door had also slammed a moment earlier, and she went over and knocked on it.

"Malfoy, are you all right?"

There was no answer.

Hermione slowly opened the door and poked her head into his bedroom. "Malfoy?"

Nothing.

She stepped inside and saw a light coming from his washroom. There was a weird mumbling just beyond it.

Against her better judgment, Hermione walked on, stopping as she reached the doorway and gasping at what she saw.

Draco was inside at the sink, scrubbing vigorously at his hands. The water swirling around the bottom of the basin was blood-red. "Won't fucking come off … Won't … fucking … come … OFF!"

"Malfoy, what happened?" Hermione asked in a panic while running over to make sure he was not injured. "Are you all right?"

"No," he said, pushing her off of him. "Not fucking all right."

"Well … are you hurt?" she asked, grabbing his hand and turning it all around, looking for some sort of gash.

"No. Not mine."

"What?" Hermione's eyes shot up to meet his.

"It's not fucking mine!" he said, pulling his hand away again. "Get out of here, Granger!"

"Malfoy, what -?" She tried to grab at his arm but he pushed her off again.

"Don't! I just want to get it off!" He rubbed his hands violently against a bar of soap under the water. "But it won't … Come. The. Fuck. Off!"

"Let me help you!" Hermione grabbed for the soap but he pulled it away from her.

"No! Get out! I don't want you to fucking see!"

"But I've already seen! Malfoy, please -"

"No … no … NO!" He pushed her away again, this time a little bit harder.

Hermione's eyes went wide as she stumbled backwards. "Don't push me!" she shouted before shoving him back.

Unprepared, Draco went flying into the wall and used it to slide to the ground. He brought his raw hands up to his eyes and cried into them. It was only then that Hermione saw the blood smeared on his face. She had been too focused on his hands before.

With a sigh, Hermione grabbed a washcloth, wet it under the still running tap and lathered some soap into it. She turned off the water and walked over to Draco, taking a seat beside him.

Draco glanced over at her and she took this moment to grab his face and hold it still, using the washcloth to wipe it clean of blood.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked while keeping his gray eyes fixed steadily on her.

She lifted her amber ones to meet his and frowned. "I don't know. But you helped me during my weak moments, didn't you?"

"I'm not wea -"

"It's all right to admit it, Malfoy. We all have them."

Draco's eyes clenched shut as his whole body tensed. "Fine, I'm weak. I'm a fucking coward," he said, his voice cracking in agony. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"No," she said honestly. "I'd rather hear that this is You-Know-Who's blood and the war is finally over."

"It's not."

"I figured. Hands."

Draco held out his hands and let her use the washcloth to scrub at them. "You'd hate me if you knew whose blood this is."

"Is it Harry's?"

"No."

"Ron's?"

"No."

"Any of the Weasleys? Or my parents?"

"No."

"Then I don't hate you," she said, taking the time to really scrub underneath his fingernails. "You've done too much for me to just dismiss you like that." She sighed and looked back at him. "So whose is it?"

Draco gulped and looked down at the hands she was still holding. He could not look at her as he said it. "That woman's. The one who gave you the knife."

"Oh," Hermione said softly. "You found her." She closed her eyes. Damn.

"Bellatrix put the pieces together. She tortured her, and then she made me do the dirty work. She always does. She is determined to break me."

"But she hasn't." Hermione began scrubbing again.

"Not yet," he said. "That woman … she used Legilimency on me before I killed her." Draco felt Hermione's hands tremble in his. "She saw you were here and … and she told me it was all right, and to do what I must."

Hermione stopped and put the washcloth down. Now she was looking at him with nothing to distract her. Just him and her. Draco tensed as he realized this.

"She looked me directly in the eye and she told me it was all right to kill her, Granger. I don't know what I'm fucking supposed to do with that." He brought one of his hands back up to his eyes and wiped at the tears that were still falling. "I just don't fucking know, Granger. What the fuck am I supposed to do with that? Does it make it *okay*?"

"No," Hermione said in a dry voice.

"I know! I fucking know! But it's all I have! It's all I fucking have and I don't know what to do!"

"There's nothing you can do, Malfoy. She's already gone."

"She said she wasn't afraid," he went on. "She knew she was going to die and she wasn't afraid. But me … every day I wake up, fearing that it is my last. I could never *not* be afraid."

Draco was not looking, but he could suddenly feel Hermione's hand slip into his. He stopped rubbing his eyes and turned to her. She met his gaze without fear and smiled softly.

"Me too," she said.

They gazed at each other for a long time, neither flinching as they realized this was the closest they had gotten to really understanding one another. Hermione had been eager to get into Draco's head for a long time, and now she felt she might actually be there. He was scared. Just like her. But, being a pureblood, he was forced down one path while her Muggle-born status forced her down another. Neither were easy, and both left their souls in tattered messes. Knowing that if you did not murder someone, you would end up losing your own life … there was no winning for a Death Eater with a sense of right and wrong.

Hermione gave Draco's hand a squeeze. Mesmerized by the faint upturn of her lips, Draco reached forward and touched her cheek. He cupped it in his palm and stroked it softly with his thumb, tracing the faint scars that still lingered there. Hermione continued to gaze back at him, neither of them breathing as their hearts started beating unbelievably fast. It had been years since either of their minds had felt so incredibly at ease. Without another thought, Draco leaned forward and delicately brushed his lips against hers. He kept his eyes open, staring deeply into her amber pools as she slowly responded with her own lips.

And then he was on her, holding her face between his hands as he kissed her more aggressively, slipping his tongue into her mouth only to be met with a matched enthusiasm by her own.

Her hands clutched the sides of his jumper. Draco could tell she did not know what she was doing, so he helped her by pulling it over his head. Then he took her hands and pressed them to his bare chest. He wanted to feel her. He wanted her to feel him.

Hermione gazed at his chest dazedly for a moment, stroking her hands slowly across the perfect, porcelain skin, not stopping until her right one was directly above his heart. Her fingers trembled as she felt the beating of it. It was so real. More real than anything she had ever felt before.

Hermione glanced back up at him and gulped.

Draco wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her towards him, kissing her passionately as he slowly began to lower them to the floor.

"Malfoy …" he heard her moan as he moved his lips over to her ear, nibbling down her neck and towards her collarbone. His hands were tangled somewhere in her jumper, touching every inch of skin he could find. It felt so natural. So pure. So …

"Fucking beautiful."

Draco did not know how long he had wanted this, but these feelings of his were not just happening now. They had been there.

His lips moved back up to hers and their tongues became entwined once more. He brought his left hand up and stroked it through her hair.

"Malfoy …" she moaned again as he began licking down her jaw. She turned her head to the side to give him better access, opening her eyes for just a moment, but a moment was all she needed to come face-to-face with the Dark Mark on Draco's left forearm. "Malfoy!" she shouted suddenly. "Malfoy, stop! STOP!"

Hermione pushed at his chest. Draco pulled back, looking confused as he stared down at her. It was a moment before his eyes finally moved to his arm still resting beside her head.

Hermione had begun to cry, her eyes clenched shut as she lay there trembling with her head turned in the opposite direction.

"Granger …"

"Please, just stop," she said with a whimper.

Draco's eyes suddenly hardened. "I'm not fucking raping you, Granger!"

Hermione's eyes shot back open. She turned and stared at his cold face. "I … I know."

"Do you?" he said before stumbling to his feet. "Because it doesn't fucking look that way. I mean … *FUCK*!"

Draco went back into his bedroom and began rummaging through his drawers for some clothes. After putting on a clean jumper, he noticed Hermione watching him from the doorway.

"Where are you going?" she asked as he pushed past her to get back into the

washroom.

"Parkinson invited me to stay over tonight," he said before turning on the sink and splashing his face several times, "and I'm taking her up on her offer."

Hermione's heart stopped at the sound of *her* name. "Malfoy, I'm sorry, I just -"

"I really don't fucking care, Granger." Draco grabbed a towel and used it to dry his hands and face. "What happened just now … that was a mistake. A mistake we will *never* make again. Do you understand?"

Hermione's bottom lip quivered as she slowly nodded yes.

"Good. Glad we're on the same fucking page."

"But do you have to leave right now?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't feel like fucking being alone right now, all right?" shouted Draco. "Simple as that."

He wasn't alone …

"But … you want to be with *her*?" spat Hermione.

"Your enemies and mine are not the same, Granger. Never forget that."

Hermione had never felt so confused before. Not wanting him to see her cry again, she quickly turned and ran to her own room, making sure to slam the door behind her.

Hermione stood against her door and listened as Draco left his room and then the flat. There was a strange pang in her heart as she heard the front door shut that she did not quite understand.

And then she realized … maybe the problem was that she did not want to be alone either. For over four years she had been nothing but alone. But, then, just now … lying on Draco's washroom floor … kissing him … touching him … holding him for those few moments … that was the closest she had gotten to an actual connection with someone in a long time. And even though the ending was hardly ideal, she found herself craving more of it. She found herself craving more of *him*.

Lying down on her bed, Hermione suddenly realized that she wanted Draco to come back. Right now and without some slag. Or, worse … Pansy Parkinson. Someone Hermione had never liked in school, but could not even think about now without feeling the pain burn in the scars she had left behind. Back when Pansy's father had owned her. She hated the Parkinsons. All of them.

Hermione sobbed into her pillow as her poor heart continued to ache. Pansy did not deserve to have Draco in her arms. But she did. After the hell she had lived through, she certainly deserved some form of happiness. Even if it was just for a moment.

More than anything, Hermione wanted to hold him again. To touch him. To feel his lips pressed against hers. If only for the night, she did not care.

Merlin, what was happening to her? What was this horrible pain she was feeling? Surely it was not …

"Not him," Hermione whispered into her pillow. "Please, anyone but him. He has his eyes."

But they were not *his* eyes. They were a shade lighter and had a light-blue ring around the pupil. And those eyes … Draco's eyes had gazed at her tonight in a way that no man's ever had before.

"Not him," she repeated into the still of the night, only this time she meant it differently. He was not him. Draco Malfoy was not his father.

But that night when Hermione screamed out from her horrible nightmares, heavy with memories of Lucius's eyes, for the first time in a long time, Draco's lighter ones were not there to wake her. And she hated that.

# Chapter 7: I Should Have Known Better

**A/N: I feel the need to remind everyone that Hermione is not the only one who is damaged in this story. While some might view Draco's behavior as cold or cruel, he has been detached from people emotionally for so long that he really just doesn't know any better. Not that I'm defending his actions in any way. He's an ass. ;o)**

**I also wanted to mention that I have decided to use the same first names for characters who didn't have them in the books that I used in my other stories. Just remember that these stories are not associated in any way, but what would be the point in changing names, other than making my life more difficult?**

**So yeah … that is all. :o)**

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"*Impedimenta*!"

Hermione let out a frustrated growl as she shot the spell at Bronson, sending him flying backwards at an incredible speed.

After a hard land on his ass, he quickly jumped back to his feet. "Merlin, Hermione. Calm dow -"

"*Locomotor Mortis*!"

Suddenly, Bronson's legs felt as if they had been glued together. He tried to take a step but only ended up toppling over. "Okay, okay! You're the clear victor!"

"*Levicorpus*!"

"HERMIONE!" screamed Bronson as he shot into the air, now dangling upside-down by his glued ankles. "Uncle! Uncle! Please, just take a breather and let me down!"

Hermione stared at him with hard, flaming eyes for a moment, wand still pointed fervently. Then, in a quick flash, her eyes softened and her mouth fell. "Oh, Merlin … Bronson, I'm sorry. I must have forgotten where I was for a moment."

"You don't say?"

Hermione continued to stare at him dangling there.

"Uhh … you gonna let me down now?"

"Oh! Right! *Liberacorpus*!"

Bronson landed smoothly on the ground. She removed the Leg-Locker Curse and he began wiggling them around to get his blood flowing again.

"You sure you're all right, Hermione?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"You've seemed off all week. The first few times we did this, you never lost control."

"I know. I just … I was trying to cast the spells nonverbally and when it didn't work I got frustrated."

"Is the problem with the wand?" he asked.

"No. It's actually a pretty good match," she said. "The problem is me. My mind just isn't what it used to be."

"Why not?"

Hermione took a deep breath and shook her head. "No reason."

Bronson pursed his lips and took several steps towards her. "Come on, Hermione. We've known each other for over three weeks now and I haven't told a soul about you. You *know* you can trust me. I know you do. So don't you think it's time you told me where you've been all this time?"

Hermione cast her eyes down to the ground and began fidgeting with her wand. "I was in a horrible place, Bronson. Many horrible places. And the people who kept me there were not against using the Cruciatus Curse religiously. That is all you need to know."

Bronson stared at her straight-faced, trying hard not to show the pity he knew she would hate. But it was impossible to hide it completely after a confession like that.

"Just answer one more thing for me," he said.

Hermione looked back up and waited patiently.

"Malfoy wasn't … he was never involved in -"

"No, of course not," she said, cutting him off. "My mind's not that deluded, Bronson. If he was then I definitely wouldn't be here."

"But I'm assuming his … 'coworkers' -" For lack of a better term.

"Malfoy's not like them."

Bronson shrugged before looking down at the new brown boots she wore on her feet. "He gave you those, did he?"

Hermione followed his eyes and frowned. "I don't fucking know."

Bronson raised his eyebrows. He had never heard that sort of language come out of her mouth before.

She held up one foot and took a good look at the boot on it. "When I went to the closet earlier, my old ones were gone and these were in their place. I guess that means he *gave* them to me," she scoffed.

Bronson's face twisted in curiosity. "Are you two in a fight or something?"

"*No.*" Hermione crinkled her nose. "I mean, when *aren't* we in a fight?"

"So you are then?"

"I don't know!" she shouted, throwing her arms up in frustration. "I haven't seen him in days. He comes home, goes straight to his room and then leaves! And he doesn't come back until the curfew has past, and then he just showers and leaves again! He doesn't even eat breakfast. I mean, he stopped fucking smoking for Merlin's sake!"

Hermione paused and took several deep breaths.

"It just seems odd, doesn't it? That barely three weeks ago, he didn't even want to leave me alone for a night and now he's *never* there."

Ah. The reasons behind her recent animosity were slowly being revealed.

"Just because I have a wand now doesn't mean I'm any safer," she said, lifting the wand and giving it a shake, "especially since I can barely fucking use it!"

"So he's avoiding you?" asked Bronson, pretty sure that he had caught on to the real problem.

"I. Don't. Know!"

Bronson crossed his arms and eyed her curiously. "Hermione, you don't … have *feelings* for Malfoy … do you?"

"*No*! What do you think I am, a masochist?"

"I suppose not. Because that *is* what you would be, you know? No good could ever come from -"

"I *know*, Bronson. My mind may be damaged but I'm not an idiot."

"Yes, and you having feelings for Malfoy would be the equivalent of a Holocaust victim having feelings for a Nazi."

Hermione's eyes widened in repulsion. There was definitely some truth behind that analogy, and Lord Voldemort had always greatly reminded her of Hitler.

He smiled. "Just to put it into perspective."

"You really have nothing to worry about," she said, her face going back to normal. "I have too much history with his aunt and father to ever look past it all." She sighed and gazed down at her wand. "Would you mind if I practiced nonverbal spells on you? I promise I won't lose control this time."

"Yes, of course. Just … let me brace myself first," he said, spreading his legs apart and planting both feet firmly on the ground. "Okay, go."

Hermione raised her wand and silently cast a Tickling Charm. She was quite pleased when Bronson fell back, laughing. It may have been an easy spell but, at least, it was something.

<p align="center">XXX</p>

Draco stood outside of the small shop in Diagon Alley, frowning as his feet crunched into the desecrated remains of the pavement. He did not know why it bothered him so much that this place had not been restored following the Dark Lord's victory. Probably because he had so many memories here, even if they were not all particularly good ones.

At this present moment, he found himself staring dazedly at a robe on a moving mannequin in the display window. It was blue and fuzzy and completely practical in every way. Definitely not something he would encourage any woman to ever wear. But Hermione would love it. No matter how much he heated the flat, she was still

always so bloody cold all the time and this seemed like the perfect solution.

Draco had just begun to take a step in the direction of the door to the shop when he heard someone call his name. He stopped and turned, his face immediately dropping when he saw Pansy running towards him.

"Hey, what are you doing here? Buying me a present?" she asked as she reached him, leaning up to give him a kiss.

Draco made sure there was no response on his end. He knew going over to her place that one night was going to end up being a mistake, but he had done it anyway. Why he had done it, he still did not understand. He remembered spurting out some crap to Hermione about not wanting to be alone but, if that were true, he could have just stayed where he was. With her. She would not have left him alone no matter how much of a prick he had been.

In his weak moment, Draco had actually had the audacity to fondle a rape victim on his washroom floor. One who had not touched another pair of lips willingly in over four years. Needless to say, he was more than a little embarrassed by the whole ordeal and had, perhaps, slightly been avoiding her. He had never felt like such a git before.

The avoidance was not all intentional, though. Pansy had also been very persistent about trying to come over to his flat, probably in some attempt to reclaim possession over him, much like kissing him in public. So he had been going over to hers for the past few nights instead. *His* attempt to stop this from happening. The last thing he needed was her to come knocking on his front door when he had a wanted witch - and Pansy's childhood rival - living in his guestroom.

"When have you ever known me to buy anyone gifts, Parkinson?"

"You bought me that bracelet for my birthday during our second year."

"I was twelve and trying to get my first snog. Worked well, from what I recall."

Pansy smiled and began to lean towards him again. Before she had a chance to make contact, Draco turned on his heel and began walking in the opposite direction, glancing sideways at the robe that would just have to wait.

He could hear Pansy's hurried footsteps behind him and then she was grabbing onto his arm, clinging to him like an annoying barnacle as he walked through the tattered streets of Diagon Alley.

There was no particular reason why Draco was here today, other than to keep his

eye open for something he might want to potentially buy Hermione. Bronson had been right before, he had not made a very good attempt to think about her needs or to make her feel like a person again. One book just wasn't going to do it after everything she had been through. He knew this, especially since she still held onto that bloody chocolate bar he had given her because she didn't want to have even less than she already did.

He had gotten her boots yesterday when he had run across a pair that seemed potentially her, but he had not even had the chance to give them to her properly before having to go running off to Pansy's. Seeing her face when receiving them would have been nice.

Draco frowned.

"What's wrong?" asked Pansy.

"Nothing," he said, quickly pulling his face back to his signature scowl.

They were just passing Flourish and Blotts when Draco caught sight of something familiar in the window. He stopped and looked at the copy of *Hogwarts: A History* sitting there, feeling more than a little surprised that it was out. The book had not been banned, like many others, but he was certain the Dark Lord would not encourage anyone to read such material. Still, Draco was not sure why it had made him stop.

"Yuck. That book always reminds me of bloody Granger."

Draco turned to see Pansy making a face as she stared at the same book. "Why?" he asked.

"Because she always had her ugly nose stuck in it in school. Don't you remember?"

"No," he said honestly. Though, something must have wedged in his mind. Why else would he have stopped?

"Hey, do you think if we put it on a giant mousetrap, we could catch her?" Pansy laughed hysterically.

"I don't fucking care," said Draco, moving to walk away. He really wished Pansy would leave him alone so he could go in there and buy that book.

The two of them had barely taken two steps when Draco noticed someone waving at him. He groaned as his father's friend, Arron Greengrass, changed directions so

he was heading straight for him, his daughter, Astoria, smiling pleasantly on his arm. As always, she was picturesque in a fitted dress and dangly jewelry, her hair waving as flawlessly as ever as she tossed it over her shoulder. Her eyes glided ever-so-slightly to Pansy's hold on Draco's arm - which only became tighter - but not for long enough to be considered rude.

"Draco, my boy. It has been so long since I have last seen you. How are you?"

"I am excellent, Sir. And how are you and your lovely daughter this pleasant afternoon?"

Draco looked at Astoria and winked. She smiled coyly. Suddenly, he could feel Pansy's nails digging into his skin. He tried hard not to grimace.

"Oh, fine. We were just in town picking up a few things. Astoria will be moving here soon."

"Will you?" said Draco, raising his eyebrows.

He tried to look intrigued, but it was really hard to obtain when he had that horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. There was only one reason why a Death Eater's child would ever move to London. To offer their services to the Dark Lord. Astoria was a nice girl. He very much doubted that her soul would be able to take it. Even Pansy had a hard time and she was not pleasant at all.

"Yes, but I will not be officially moving here until the beginning of December. We have found the flat I will be living in but my father wants to keep me at home just a little bit longer." Astoria looked at her father and smiled dotingly.

"Well, you are my last little girl living at home."

There was a flash of sadness in Astoria's eyes as she, undoubtedly, thought of her sister, Daphne. From what Draco understood, she had moved out shortly after the Battle of Hogwarts and had rarely been heard from since. The rumor was that she was living somewhere just outside of the city, where the laws were slightly less strict. He was pretty sure Pansy kept in touch with her but, if she did, she did not mention it. Her focus still seemed to be on squeezing the life out of Draco's arm.

"Perhaps when she's here, Draco, you will be kind enough to keep an eye on her for me. Maybe take her around, show her the ropes of the big city."

"I would be glad to." He really wouldn't be. Draco was already taking care of one witch, and she was hard enough to handle.

"That would be wonderful," said Astoria. "I will make sure and owl you as soon as I am settled." She glanced at Pansy and smiled. "Well, it looks like we are interrupting something. We won't burden you with our presence any longer. Father, perhaps it is time we head back home. It looks like rain and I did not bring my cloak with me."

"Yes, dear, that would be fine. Draco, I will be in town for Death Eater duties next week and was hoping I might trouble you with some questions. Rabastan has been to see me recently, and he is greatly bothered by your lack of progress in the current investigation."

Draco could not avoid an eye roll. Damn that Granger and her horribly addictive habits. "I'm sure he isn't. And, I suppose, he has some suggestions he would like you to pass on to me."

Arron smiled. "He simply does not understand why you have not had your Death Eaters search every home for her. Clearly, the curfew has had no effect."

"I haven't done it because I don't believe she's here. But, if it will ease his troubled mind, I suppose I can waste everyone's time by doing just that. I'll have the Dark Lord bring it up in our meeting next week. Anything to shut Rabastan up already."

Astoria and Pansy both smirked.

"Excellent. I will see you then. Come along, Astoria."

"So long, Draco," she said, completely ignoring Pansy as her father pulled her away.

"I don't like her," said Pansy as soon as they were a fair enough distance away. "Did you notice the way she looks at you?"

Of course he had. "No."

A clock chimed and Pansy looked up at it. "Crap. I was supposed to meet my parents ten minutes ago." She looked back at Draco and asked, "Can I come over tonight? Maybe make you dinner."

"No."

She frowned. "Why not?"

"Why do you feel this incessant need to come over? What's wrong with your place?"

"Because I want to go to yours. *Please*. Just this once."

"No."

"I won't even ask to stay over. I know you hate that. Just let me come over for a little while."

Draco groaned. "Fine." Anything to shut her up. "But you better be long fucking gone before the curfew."

She smiled as he caved. "I will."

"I mean it, Parkinson. You're not fucking staying over."

Her smile vanished. "I know. You're such an arse, you know that?" Finally releasing his arm, she turned to leave. Calling over her shoulder, she said, "I'll see you at seven!"

With her gone, Draco turned back towards Flourish and Blotts and stared at the book in the window. He had just started to take a step towards the door when someone called, "Hey, Draco!"

"*Fuck*," he mumbled to himself before turning to see Theo and Gregory Goyle walking towards him. So much for doing something nice today. Oh well. She probably would have seen it as creepy, anyway.

<p style="text-align:center;">XXX</p>

Draco did not make it back to his flat until half past six. When he got there, Hermione was sitting on his sofa with a cup of tea in her hand and *Complex Conundrums* on her lap. Her face was crinkled up in thought as she read one of the more complicated riddles.

"Want to read it aloud?" he asked while hanging up his cloak.

"No," she said coldly, without even so much as a glance up at him.

Draco frowned as he walked over to her and handed her a bag. She took her eyes off the book and looked at it. "What is that?"

"Dinner," he said. "Unfortunately, I am going to need you to stay in your room tonight. Someone is coming over in thirty minutes and you can't be seen."

"Why on earth would you invite someone here?" she asked, finally looking up at

him.

"I didn't. They invited themselves and I couldn't get out of it."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "*You* couldn't get out of something? With that mouth of yours?"

Draco knew she was talking about his wit, but his mind could not help but drift to their moment together on the washroom floor. He avoided her eyes and said, "I know. Shocking."

Hermione stared at the bag in his hand for a moment longer. She frowned before taking it. "Fine, Malfoy. I'll go and isolate myself for the night. What else is new?"

Draco sighed as she stood up and walked towards her room with the book, tea and food, and he could not help but think how pleasant she would look in that ridiculous robe right now.

"Granger."

She turned as she reached her doorway.

"I don't have anything to do tomorrow. Would it be all right if I went down to the basement with you and helped you with your magic?"

Hermione stared at him with her mouth agape. He did not quite understand why she looked so surprised. He hadn't been that bad this last week, had he?

Finally, Hermione blinked and then smiled softly. "Sure, Malfoy. But you're not going to be very impressed. The most progress I've made is casting a Tickling Hex nonverbally."

"That's why you need me. I'm positive that I'm a better teacher than fucking Bronson."

"Whatever you say." She chuckled and started to turn, "Oh!" but quickly turned back. "And thank you for the boots."

Hermione smiled one last time before stepping into her room and shutting the door.

For a long moment, Draco just stood there, staring at it. He would much rather be spending his evening on the balcony with her, but Pansy was a persistent pain in his arse and he just needed to get this fucking over with before she finally took a

hint. Besides, she wasn't the worst shag in the world.

Pansy arrived at seven o'clock sharp. She had actually brought crap to make him dinner with and he was starting to get the dreaded feeling that she thought this was a date. After she cooked, Draco sat at the table and she opted to sit in his lap instead of in her own chair, annoyingly feeding him bites of the rancid tasting chicken she had cooked. Draco continued to chug a bottle of firewhiskey he had brought out, knowing very well that he was going to need it.

As soon as he ate enough to satisfy her, she pulled him over to the sofa, sitting on the arm while pulling him between her legs. "Can we shag here tonight?" she asked, stretching up so she could nibble on his ear.

"No," he said sternly.

Pansy pulled back and pouted. "Why not? We've shagged on your sofa before."

"On my old one."

"Oh." She turned and glanced at it. "It looks the same."

"It's not."

It was. But, looking over at the spot Hermione so often occupied, he knew he could not shag Pansy here. It just seemed wrong to taint Hermione's spot like that.

"Just go get on my fucking bed already, will you?"

"Whatever you say," she said, squealing as she ran into his bedroom.

Hermione's head shot up from her book at the sound. Until that moment, she had been making a point to ignore Draco and whoever it was he had out there with him, but she could not help but recognize that irritating shriek.

Standing up, she went over to the door and put her ear up to it, but no sound was coming from the living room anymore. Then she looked at the wall separating her room from Draco's and gulped. She walked over to it and listened carefully.

"*Come on, Draco. Lighten up. Seriously, what's with you tonight*?"

"*Just take your fucking clothes off.*"

"*You're not going to help me*?"

"*No. Fuck, Pansy, you know I like to get straight to the bloody point. Now, take off your fucking clothes already.*"

Hermione jumped back from the wall and nearly tripped on her own feet. Luckily, she caught herself before her stumble could make too much noise. She began hyperventilating as she realized what Draco had done. He had brought *her* here. Pansy Parkinson.

Hermione couldn't breathe. She fell to her knees and gasped for air, urgently seeking her wand to cast a Silencing Charm, but she was too panicky to concentrate and nothing happened.

"No," she mumbled to herself while still trying to catch the breath she had lost. "Not her."

Hermione's side began to ache and she reached under her jumper, stroking the scarred flesh that lay there. This was the spot restricting her breathing. She began to cry as their noisy shagging commenced, not even caring that her sobs were loud and hysterical. The two of them would be too distracted to notice.

Finally able to get to her feet, Hermione grabbed her comforter off of the bed and wrapped it around her. She went over to the window and sunk down beside it, keeping her ears close to it in hopes that the gentle sound of rain outside might distract her. It didn't.

Draco was having a hard time focusing as Pansy bounced on top of him. He tried groping and sucking on her breasts - the one part of her he had always been quite fond of - to keep himself in the mood, but his mind kept wandering back to that damn robe. And it did not help when his eyes drifted to his washroom door. It had been only one week since he had been on top of Hermione on that floor, and Pansy was the first girl he had had in his room since.

"Oh, Draco," Pansy moaned as she pulled his head in for a sloppy kiss, forcing his eyes to leave their current place of interest.

Eager to get her lips off of his, Draco grabbed Pansy by the waist and tossed her onto her back. He climbed on top of her and began thrusting vigorously, his gaze now focused on the wall in front of him. The one Hermione was behind.

His head was suddenly flooded with visions of her. Her pink lips, her creamy skin, the rosy blush of her lightly freckled cheeks … and the sweet, sweet sound of his name slipping from her mouth as he trailed his tongue down her neck.

And then Draco was imagining her in that robe. That bloody fucking robe that could hardly be considered sexy. He could see it wrapped warmly around her, snuggled against her milky skin. Then he was moving towards her, slipping it off one shoulder and then the other, letting it drop to a careless heap on the ground. Her beautiful, yet scarred body was a vision as he reached out and touched it, grabbed it, caressed it, pressed it against his own. It was his, just like she was.

*His.*

His hands moved into that bushy mess that she called hair and he pulled her head towards his. Kissing her. Touching her. Slamming her against the wall and fucking her. It was all there and he could bloody taste it. The sweet tang of her mouth as she writhed around him, clutching him, clawing at him, moaning his name between parts of their lips, holding him in a way no one ever had before. Because she needed him. She needed him and he wanted her. Just once. Just to taste. Just to …

Bloody.

*Thrust.*

Fucking.

*Thrust.*

Taste!

"FUCK! DRACO!" the witch beneath him screamed as she came undone around him.

In three more thrusts, Draco was coming inside of her, having to bite down hard on his bottom lip to keep from screaming Hermione's name, the taste of metal on his tongue.

His body eased as he began to catch his breath. He was confused for a moment when he looked down and noticed that Pansy was the one staring back at him. It was not who he had expected.

Draco rolled off of her, his eyes widening as he realized what he had just done. He had just come while thinking he was shagging Hermione.

"Fuck," he whispered to himself, suddenly feeling like he was going to vomit.

Pansy moved so her head was resting on his chest. "Draco, that was … wow.

You've never shagged me like that before."

He looked down at her curiously.

"I mean, it's always good. You know it is. But *that* … I don't know what *that* was but I can't wait for more."

She brought her hand down and began to stroke him, but Draco was quick to snatch her wrist and push her off.

"It's time to go, Pansy."

"What?" she asked, sitting up. "But it's barely ten. Curfew doesn't start for another two hours."

"I don't care. I'm fucking tired and I want to go to sleep."

"And you're sure I can't stay?"

"I said fucking no, didn't I?" Draco yelled while rolling off the bed and getting to his feet. He headed for the washroom. "I'm taking a shower." He had never felt so dirty before. "Be gone by the time I get out." He slammed the door.

After a very long and necessary soak, Draco was happy to find that Pansy had listened and left. He changed into some pajama bottoms and a jumper, and grabbed his cigarettes off of the dresser.

On his way to the balcony, Draco glanced at Hermione's door. Even after that humiliating experience, he still had this strange urge to see her. As she was. Not the dirty image of her he had created in his own twisted mind. So he went over and let himself in.

"Granger?" Draco poked his head inside and looked around. The bed was bare of the comforter, but he found it in a strange bundle beside the window. "Granger, what the fuck are you doing?"

Silence.

"Granger?" Draco took a cautious step into the room. "Are you all right?"

Nothing.

Noticing the comforter fidget a little, Draco walked across the room and crouched down beside it. He reached his hand out and touched what he hoped was her

shoulder. "Granger, what's -"

Her body snapped and he felt a hand shove him back. "Don't fucking touch me!" she shouted as he landed hard on his arse.

"Granger, what the fuck?" he said, grabbing at the comforter and pulling it off of her head.

"I said, don't *touch me*!" Hermione's hands flew out of it and she shoved him again, only much harder this time. "Stay the fuck away from me, Malfoy!"

Crinkling his brow, Draco asked, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"With *me*? What the fuck is wrong with *me*? What the fuck is wrong with *you*?"

"What do you mea -"

"How could you bring her here?" shouted Hermione, her face bright crimson and soaked from what might have been an hour's worth of tears.

Draco's mouth dropped slightly. "Pansy?" he asked.

"Who the fuck else would I be talking about?" Hermione pulled the comforter back over her head. "Get out."

"Look, Granger, I know the two of you never got along in school, but aren't you being a bit dramatic?"

Her head popped back out. "Are you an idiot?" she asked, her face twisting in disgust. "I've been a slave, Malfoy! And she's a fucking Death Eater!"

"Pansy never owned you," said Draco, pulling himself off of the ground and getting to his feet.

"No, but her father did!" said Hermione, standing right up with him while still clutching the comforter around her. "You said you kept track of me, Malfoy! I have a hard time believing you didn't know he owned me!"

"I … I knew," said Draco, trying to recall exactly when that was. Maybe three years ago. Pansy had only been a Death Eater for just over two. She would have still been living at home.

"Yes, well, your fucking *girlfriend* didn't like all of the attention her precious father gave me when her own mother was right there! So you know what she did? When

he wasn't home, she came into the fucking closet he kept me locked up in and she tortured me!"

Draco's jaw stiffened as he stood frozen. He really had no idea …

"But no, not the Cruciatus Curse! That was too easy for her, and she just thought she was so much cleverer than that! So you know what she did?"

Draco's throat was raw as Hermione spoke. He shook his head weakly and said, "No," almost afraid to hear the answer.

Hermione let the comforter drop and lifted her jumper so Draco could get a good look at a large scar covering most of her right side. A large, indented scar that was still a glossy pink and fresh looking, even after all of these years. Draco instinctually reached out for it, but Hermione pulled her jumper back down before he could.

"It's my biggest one. And it still hurts. It still fucking hurts me, Malfoy! Pansy thought if she scarred me then her father wouldn't want me, so she burned me here with a curse that will never heal! And I have several smaller ones all over me! She wanted to get me all over but the magic was too fucking advanced for her!"

Hermione paused for a moment when she was unable to control her whimper. She wiped her cheeks before looking back at Draco, a horrible, raging fire visible in her amber eyes. He didn't like it.

"And these!" Hermione held out her wrists so Draco could get a good look at the millions of marks all over them. "These deep ones here are from when her father used to tie me up so fucking tight I couldn't even struggle! Back when I still tried!"

Draco really wanted to grab her right now. To take her into his arms and hug her, apologize for being such an idiot and promising to seek revenge. But he didn't do that. Instead, all he said was, "Granger, I … I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't! Because you never fucking asked! You should have asked, Malfoy! You should have asked me before you brought a fucking Death Eater here! You should have known! You should have fucking known better!" Hermione lunged forward and shoved him towards the door. "Get out!"

"Granger, I … I'm sor -"

"GET OUT!" she screamed, shoving him again and again until he was in the doorway.

Draco grabbed the sides of it and tried to brace himself. "Granger, stop! Please, just let me explain -"

"There is *nothing* for you to explain, Malfoy! I understand this is your flat, and that you were *kind* enough to let me stay here! But *this* … *this* is crossing the fucking line! Don't talk to me! Don't *ever* fucking talk to me unless it's to say the curfew is over and security is limited enough for me to get the hell out of here! Understand?"

"Granger, please -"

"GET OUT YOU SELFISH PRICK!"

"No! I -"

Hermione took her wand out and pointed it at him, casting a nonverbal *Impedimenta*.

Draco went flying backwards and landed hard against the arm of the sofa. As soon as his eyes focused, he looked at her door just in time to see it slam. He ran over and began pulling at the knob but she had cast several Locking Charms. And he wouldn't be able to use his own wand to undo them. There was no good lie for reversing that many locks.

"GRANGER! FUCK!" he shouted while slamming his fist into the door. "I'M SORRY, ALL RIGHT? I'M FUCKING SORRY!"

Draco knew he didn't say it much, but that was because he so rarely actually was. But this time, he truly regretted what he had done and he hated himself for giving into Pansy. He didn't even want to shag her. It was all just a mistake. A horrible, fucking mistake.

Giving up on ever getting in, Draco went back to his own room and began throwing things around.

"Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!" he shouted as he slammed his nightstand into the wall, knocking it into a million wooden shards.

Draco hated this. He hated that he was so affected by a fucking scar on someone else's body. *Her* body. The same one he had been imagining beneath him not even thirty minutes earlier. The urge to vomit was back.

Draco quickly ran to the washroom and pulled the toilet seat up just in time to heave into it. When it passed, he crawled over to the same wall he had sat against with her just last week.

What the hell was wrong with him? The whole fucking thing was really taking a toll on him and he didn't like it. For the first time in his life, he felt like he was not in control. *She* was.

"Granger," he whispered as he lied down on the cold tile. "Fucking bitch." Only she wasn't, and he suddenly hated himself for even thinking it.

And then Draco's mind drifted back to that robe. For some reason, he really wanted her to have it, but there was no way he could go into a shop like that without raising suspicion. Luckily, it was only Pansy who had seen him today but what if it had been someone who might actually question why he was about to walk into a women's shop?

And then he remembered. This was exactly what the fucker downstairs was for.

Getting to his feet, Draco ran into his bedroom and dug through his sock drawer for his extra pouch of Galleons. Once he had it, he went to the front of the flat and ran out the door, not even bothering to put his shoes on.

Draco did not stop until he got to the third floor. Bronson and Quigley were not in the hallway, per usual, so he immediately began banging on their door. It was several moments before Quigley answered.

"Malfoy, what the hell are you -"

"I need Bronson," he demanded.

Quigley raised his eyebrows. "Bronson? Why?"

"We're fucking lovers, asshole. Now, get him the fuck out here!"

"Such language." Quigley smiled. "Hey, Bronson!" he called over his shoulder. "Your lover's here to see you!"

"My what?" asked Bronson, coming to the door. "Malfoy? It's, like, five minutes to curfew. What do you -?"

"I'll be quick," said Draco, stepping back so Bronson could come out.

The other two wizards eyed each other skeptically. They each shrugged and Bronson stepped into the hallway, shutting the door behind him. "You okay, Malfoy?" he asked, taking in his disheveled appearance.

"I'm fine," he lied, "but I need you to do something for me."

"Go on," said Bronson, crossing his arms.

Draco tossed the Galleons at him and he caught them. "In Diagon Alley there is this shop. I don't know the name, but it's this women's shop and there's this blue and fuzzy and completely ridiculous robe in the window."

"Uhuh …"

"And Granger needs to have it."

Bronson crinkled his brow. "Why?"

"She just fucking does, all right?" shouted Draco.

"Okay … So, why can't you get it?"

"I tried! I fucking tried but every-fucking-where I go, someone I know is there! I can't fucking get away from them!" Draco was fidgeting and pacing, clutching the sides of his head and pulling at his hair. It did not even cross his mind that he probably looked insane.

"Malfoy … you're kind of freaking me out."

"Just get it, will you?" he demanded.

"Okay …" said Bronson. "Anything else?"

Draco thought about this. "A book. In Flourish and Blotts. *Hogwarts: A History*. It's her favorite." He thought.

"Done," said Bronson, tossing the pouch in the air a few times before pocketing it. "You sure you're all right? When I saw Hermione earlier, I got the feeling the two of you were in a fight or something."

"We're not in a fight! Did she say we were in a fucking fight?"

"No, but she seemed to think you were avoiding her."

"Why the fuck would I be avoiding her?" shouted Draco, his mind immediately returning to the washroom floor.

"I don't know. You tell me."

"I'm not!"

Bronson paused and eyed him curiously. "Malfoy … promise me you're not going to do something stupid."

"Of course I'm not going to do something stupid!" Again.

"So you're not … you don't … I mean, you and Hermione …"

A reminder chimed in the air, letting everyone in the city know that curfew was starting. "Get it, Bronson. Tomorrow."

Draco turned to leave.

"Malfoy, wait," called Bronson. "I just wanted to warn you that there's supposed to be a thunderstorm tomorrow night."

Draco looked back at him and cocked an eyebrow. "So?"

"Well, I mean, I just thought you should know so you can prepare. Since Hermione's afraid of them and all."

Draco blinked.

"You didn't know?"

He blinked again.

Bronson rolled his eyes. Apparently, they were all picking up the habit. "The night you had me stay up there with her, there was one. She got so freaked out that she ended up sleeping in the bathtub."

Oh. Well, that explained why her bed had not been slept in. Draco should not have felt relieved about that but, for some reason, he was.

"I'll take care of it."

Without another word, Draco ran back up to his flat, shutting the door and locking it with only seconds left until curfew. The effects of being out past midnight were always different, and Draco had no desire to find out whether it was imprisonment, torture or death on the menu tonight.

After staring at her door for several minutes, Draco went over to it and tried the knob again. Still locked. He sighed before heading to his own room.

Draco stared at his bed for a long while before waving his wand to rid the sheets of any signs of Pansy.

"Fucking bitch." And this time, he meant it.

Climbing into bed, Draco closed his eyes and tried to drift off to sleep, only he had to get up and vomit every time his mind drifted to inappropriate thoughts of Hermione.

"What the fuck is wrong with me," he whispered while crouched over the toilet, his eyes drifting back to the spot he had been in with her. He hated that spot. Only, he really didn't.

# Chapter 8: All Things Must Pass

**A/N: I know this chapter is short, but I'm a bit ahead on this story and the next two are both ridiculously long. Hopefully, that will make up for it!**

**Thanks for all of the reviews so far! I really appreciate all of the positive feedback and I hope we can keep that coming! :o)**

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Draco woke up the next morning to the sound of someone noisily going through his desk in the living room. He rubbed at his tired eyes for a moment before the events of the night before came flooding back to him.

In a quick movement that was meant to be swifter than it was, Draco stumbled off of his bed and ran to the door. He threw it open just in time to witness Hermione's foot head back into her bedroom. Her door slammed but he went to it anyway, aggressively pulling at the knob. Locked. Damn, she was quick.

"Seriously, Granger? This is fucking ridiculous! Get back out here, *now*!"

A weird surge that entered through his hand on the door let him know that a Silencing Charm had gone up.

"Fuck!"

Draco smacked the door in frustration before returning to his own room and collapsing on his bed. He kept his door open, just in case she decided to come out and go to the kitchen or something. She was definitely going to need the loo at least once.

Draco waited all day but Hermione never came back out. At one point, he had started to drift into a daze. It was a moment before he realized his mind had immediately filled with images of her again, and the images were hardly innocent. His eyes shot open and, as soon as he returned to full consciousness, he realized he had been touching himself. He pulled his hand away quickly, feeling absolutely repulsed.

While he tried to tell himself the reasons behind this repulsion were because she was a Mudblood, he already knew that was not true. It was because of everything she had been through. It just seemed wrong to do those things to her without her consent, even if they were just in his mind.

Of course, he could never ask her permission for such a thing. Draco would rather never shag again in his life than admit to these thoughts.

Sometime in the middle of the day, Draco's mindless staring at his ceiling was interrupted by someone banging on his front door. He got up to check, hoping it was Bronson with the things for Hermione, but it wasn't. One look out of the Muggle peephole let him know that it was Pansy, and the loud cursing dropping from her mouth every few seconds was another surefire sign. She was angry. He did not know why, but he did not fucking care either. There was no way he was letting her in his flat. Even after Hermione was gone and out of his life forever, he would never allow her near him again. They were finished.

It was a good hour before she left, and Draco killed the time by smoking on his balcony. And then he killed more time out there. The sun had already long set when Draco started to wonder what the fuck he was doing. Why was he waiting around for her? She clearly was not coming out. Not tonight, anyway.

"Fuck this."

Draco marched back inside and into his bedroom. There was no reason for Hermione's actions to be affecting him this much, and he was not going to waste his time any longer.

After changing into some clothes, Draco went back into the living room and knocked, once more, on Hermione's door.

"Granger, if you can hear me, I'm going out! I won't be back until late so come the fuck out, eat, use the loo, and then go back to your fucking cave before I return! I don't fucking care!"

That sounded convincing enough.

Draco put on his cloak and shoes, and left the flat. He went to Theo's and dragged him out to the Leaky Cauldron for dinner and drinks. Lots and lots of drinks.

"Any particular reason you're chugging down that bottle of firewhiskey like it's the bloody elixir of life?"

Draco slammed the bottle he was holding down on the table and took a deep breath. "You act like me drinking heavily is rare or something."

"You're right," said Theo. "It's not. But it's the way you're drinking it. You pissed or something?"

"No!" he spat.

"You sure? Because it seems like you're pissed."

"I'm not!" He bloody was. Why the hell wouldn't she come out of her fucking room and talk to him? She was living there for Merlin's sake! Was she honestly planning to avoid him from now until the day she left? Who knew when that would be?

Draco gulped as his mind suddenly became plagued by the idea of Hermione leaving. Would she take the robe with her when she left? The books? The boots? The fucking chocolate bar she still would not eat?

Without thinking, Draco picked up the bottle again and chugged some more of it.

"Easy there, Draco," said Theo, reaching out and taking it from him. "Prime pickings for the night aren't even here yet. You can't be wasted off your arse before you even find some."

"I don't care. I don't feel like shagging some slag tonight."

Theo's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Really?"

"Really," he said, suddenly thinking of Hermione in that fucking robe again. He grabbed to bottle back from Theo and chugged some more. "Got enough of that the last few nights with fucking Parkinson. Can't even believe I went back down that bloody road."

"Huh. Is that why she's looking at you like she wants to rip your dick off right now?"

Draco froze mid-sip. He put the bottle on the table and gulped the remaining liquid down. "What?"

"Parkinson. She's sitting right over there." Theo motioned with his head. "And she doesn't look very happy. What'd you do to her?"

"Nothing," said Draco. Yet.

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco could see Pansy watching him. She had seemed pretty pissed when she was banging on his door earlier and it appeared that she had not calmed any. *Had* he done something to her? Other than the obvious of kicking her out, but it had hardly been the first time. In fact, he even recalled kicking her out shortly after taking her virginity the summer they were fourteen. That was worse. But the way she was looking at him now … there was definitely something more.

Suddenly, Pansy was out of her chair and on her way over to him. It seemed like he was about to find out.

"You fucking bastard!" she shouted, slamming something on the table. Draco looked down to see it was a piece of parchment. "We've been part of each other's lives since we were fucking eleven and *this* is how you treat me? Fuck you, Draco!"

Draco eyed the parchment curiously. Funny. He didn't remember sending her anything. "What the fuck are you talking about, Parkinson?"

"Parkinson? *Parkinson*? What, you can't even call me by my fucking name anymore?"

"I am your superior, *Parkinson*. Outside of the fucking bedroom, all you are is another subordinate. Accept it."

"FUCK YOU!" she repeated before storming away with tears in her eyes.

As soon as she was gone, Theo picked up the parchment she had left behind. A few seconds later he was bursting out, laughing. "Oh, shit! You *are* a fucking arse!"

Curiosity getting the better of him, Draco ripped the parchment out of Theo's hands. He was instantly met with a short letter written in his handwriting:

*Parkinson,*

*While our last few nights together may have you starting to believe that something is rekindling between us, I would like to make it clear that these feelings are one sided. I think you are a filthy slag and have little purpose beyond the sheets. You are an ugly person both inside and out and I have no intention of ever bedding you again.*

Bedding? Who the fuck says … Oh, shit!

*I understand that, since we are both Death Eaters, we will be required to see each other from time to time, but that is the extent of our relationship. Never speak to me, never touch me, and never, EVER come to my place again!*

*Sincerely,*

*Draco Malfoy*

*P.S. Your moaning sounds like a fucking dying Chihuahua.*

That little fucking …

"Did you really write that, mate?"

Draco's head popped up and he looked blankly at Theo. "What?"

"It just doesn't really sound like you. Don't get me wrong, it definitely has a certain edge, but the language just seems … dare I say proper? Until the end. That last line is *fantastic*! I used to hear her when you would kick us out of the Slytherin dormitories to shag. You really hit it spot on."

Draco blinked.

"So … did you write that?"

Draco blinked again. "Looks like it." He looked back down at the letter, eyes still on it as he grabbed the bottle of firewhiskey and took several large gulps.

"Hey, Draco! Snap back to reality!" shouted Theo, taking the bottle from him once again. "Seriously, mate, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," said Draco, suddenly feeling furious as he crushed the letter in his hand. "I need to fucking go." He stood up and stuffed it into his pocket.

"What? Go where?" asked Theo.

"Home," said Draco. "I need to take care of some shit." *Someone* in particular.

Theo watched with curiosity as his friend threw on his cloak and sped out of the pub.

Draco couldn't let her fucking get away with this. How the hell had she even gotten that letter to Pansy? And, what was more important, why the fuck had she done it? Hermione had risked both of their lives by sending it. What if Pansy had seen right through it? They were lucky she was a fucking idiot.

Draco got back to his flat in record time. On his way up the stairs, he passed Bronson, who was smoking in the hallway. He stopped and stared at him, his eyes narrowing. *Him.*

"OI! Malfoy! I let myself into your place to drop off that - THE FUCK?"

Draco had Bronson by the collar and slammed into the closest wall. "I know it was fucking you who helped her!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're the only one who fucking knows she's here! How the hell else could she of done it?"

Clearly, all logic had left Draco somewhere between those many chugs of firewhiskey, because it did not even cross his mind that he had been in his flat all day, and not once had Bronson and Hermione made contact. But rationality was not his top priority right now, so he punched him.

"FUCK!" shouted Bronson, clutching at the eye Draco had hit and falling to his knees. "What the hell you do that for?"

"Stay the fuck away from her!"

"What?"

"Stay. The fuck. Away."

And with that, Draco turned back towards the stairs and darted up them, the effects of the alcohol finally hitting his stomach somewhere between the fourth and fifth floor. Shit.

Still, he made it into his flat and dashed towards the toilet, glancing at her closed bedroom door as he went by. After a few rounds of vomiting, Draco got back up with as much vigor as before and marched out to the living room, where he began banging on Hermione's door.

"Granger! Open the *fucking* door!" He kicked it when she didn't come.

"It's not fucking locked!" she shouted from the other side.

Draco tried the knob and, sure enough, the door opened. He stormed inside. Hermione was sitting on the bed with the book of riddles in her lap and the radio playing on her nightstand. It was currently just static. She looked up as he entered, that fire in her eyes from yesterday slightly diminished but still burning deep. His gaze immediately fell upon her lips, as pink and plump as ever. He could just picture himself sucking that bottom one between his teeth.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" she asked when he did not immediately start talking.

Coming out of his daze, Draco tore the letter out of his pocket and slammed it on the book in front of her. "What the fuck is this?"

Hermione lifted the small piece of parchment and unwrinkled it. "It looks like a letter in your hand," she said.

"Only it's not. It's not fucking in my hand, Granger, and you know it!"

Hermione smiled smugly before closely her book and putting it aside. "I don't know what you're -"

"How the fuck did you do it?"

Her amber eyes gazed up at him.

"*Tell me* how the fuck you got this letter to Parkinson!"

"I owled it," she said casually as she furrowed her brow.

"You *owled* it?"

"Yes, Malfoy. There were some carrier owls flying outside of my window and I used my wand to call one over. I wasn't sure it would be able to deliver it with just a name but, it seems, there were no problems."

"Are you fucking insane?"

Hermione's face dropped. Draco did not catch it.

"Do you have any idea what could have happened if someone found out it wasn't me who sent this? It doesn't even fucking sound like me!"

"You're right. I didn't put enough obscenities," she said, glancing down at the letter still clutched in her hands, her mind instantly going back to that word. *Insane.*

"Damn right, you didn't! I mean … FUCK! Do you *want* to get caught? Because, if you do, I can summon the Dark Lord here right now and he can start planning both of our fucking executions!"

Hermione let out a sound that was somewhere between a hiccup and a sob.

Draco froze. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not …" *hiccup* … "insane." Tears flooded and then poured from her eyes.

"What?"

"I'm not insane!" she repeated, glaring at him with her glossy pools of amber. "How

did you get this letter, Malfoy?"

"What?" he repeated.

"How *the fuck* did you get this letter?" she shouted while getting to her feet. "When I curse does that make you *fucking* understand me better?"

"How the fuck do you think I got it? Parkinson gave it to me."

"So you went over there?"

Draco turned white. "What?"

"You went over there! You went over to her place to shag her again after everything I told you!"

"No, I -"

"Don't lie to me!" shouted Hermione, crumpling up the letter and tossing it at him. "You don't even care! You don't even fucking care that she tortured me!"

"Granger, no -"

Draco reached out for her, but she pushed him away. "Don't touch me!"

His eyes and nostrils began to flare. He was getting really sick of this. "Fuck you, Granger!"

She looked up and the two of them locked eyes. Draco began to step forward so Hermione stepped back, not stopping until she hit the wall. Grabbing her wrists, Draco pinned her there.

"I did *not* fucking go there," he said harshly, his breath hitting her in foul, heavy waves.

She grimaced.

"She found me when I was out with Theo. You understand? I would *not* do that to you. What more do I fucking have to do for you before you trust me?"

"How about not breathing on me after you vomit?" Hermione squirmed to push him away.

Draco let go of her wrists and took a small step back, but he still rested his hands

on the wall on either side of her, using it to brace himself while he breathed her in. That intoxicating natural floral scent of hers that he had been missing all day.

"How much have you had to drink tonight, Malfoy?" she asked, trying to look into his eyes.

"I don't fucking know," he answered, avoiding those sad amber irises he had become so accustomed to. Draco leaned forward and nuzzled his head into her hair. So soft. So incredibly fucking soft. "Don't be angry with me," he whispered.

Hermione gulped as her body began to ease beneath him. "Please, Malfoy … please just get out."

Draco nodded against her. He touched her hand with his before pulling away and turning, not looking back until he got to the door. Hermione had not moved.

"For what it's worth, Granger," he said, "you didn't have to write that letter. It was already finished. I was wrong before. Our enemies … they're the same."

"Thank you," Hermione said weakly as she wiped at her damp eyes.

Draco shut the door behind him. He felt repulsive. For shagging Pansy. For calling Hermione insane. For putting those tears in her eyes …

As soon as he got back to his own room, Draco used his wand and toothbrush to thoroughly clean his mouth out before jumping in the shower. Even through the haze of the steam on the glass, his eyes kept drifting to that spot on the floor. He could still see himself there, lying on top of her while he caressed her skin, planting sweet kisses down her jaw and onto her neck.

Something inside of him was still forcing him to deny he wanted her but, deep down, he knew he did. He wanted her even before that moment. Possibly this went all the way back to that first night he had fallen asleep in her bed, when he woke up in the morning and found her hand in his. He had not admitted it then, but he liked that feeling. Having her there. Needing him. Relying on him. He hated that he had to share her with Bronson. And Potter and Weasley. They may not have been here, but her mind was never far from them. Especially Weasley. Fucking prick.

But Hermione … Even after everything that had happened to her, she still seemed so innocent. So pure. How was that possible?

Even with her scars, he could not find one flaw on her. And while her mind might have been damaged, she was still one of the most intelligent people he knew. For

some reason, that was strangely stimulating. And her warmth. The beautiful warmth of her body the few times she had let him hold her. He was picturing his arms around her now, running his hands along her hips, into her jumper, not stopping until he was caressing those perfect … fucking … breasts.

"FUCK!" Draco shouted as he came in the shower. He had not even realized he had been jacking off. And to images of *her*. Again. "Fuck," he said more softly this time.

Draco looked back over to that spot on the washroom floor. The only solace he could find in any of this was that, during those few moments he had her there, the feelings had not been only his. She had kissed back. She had moaned his name. Until she saw that fucking mark on his arm, she was into it.

Draco knew that, deep down, she wanted him too. Only, the blockages in her mind were even worse than his. Draco was a Death Eater, and Death Eaters had tortured and raped her for over four years. No relationship in her future could ever be quite right. How could Draco even touch her without arousing those painful memories?

With a heavy sigh, Draco cleaned himself off and stepped out of the shower. He changed and climbed into bed, for the first time realizing how cold it was without someone there beside him.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Draco was awoken by the sound of resonating thunder. A streak of lightning lit up the sky outside of his window.

"Shit," he said as he remembered what Bronson had told him.

Not even a second later, footsteps sounded through the living room, followed by a slam of the washroom door.

Draco got out of bed and left his room. Another round of thunder echoed through his flat, followed by a high-pitched squeal.

He opened the door to the washroom and quietly said, "Granger?"

"Y-yeah?" he heard her stutter in response.

The room was dark, but another flash of lightning let him see that she was hidden underneath her comforter in the bathtub.

"*Lumos*!"

Draco went over to the tub and crouched down beside it. He lifted the comforter just enough to see her wide and frightened eyes.

"Hey, Granger" he said softly. "You all right?"

Hermione nodded her head yes, but another loud burst of thunder and a high yip said otherwise.

"Bronson told me you're afraid of thunder. He said you slept in here the night he stayed over."

"I did," she said, her wide eyes darting around frantically.

"Have you always been afraid?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

She shook her head again.

"Why haven't you used your wand to put up a Silencing Charm?"

"I - Eek!" Another round of thunder.

Draco smiled. Those tiny sounds she was making were kind of adorable.

"I can't concentrate when I'm upset. That's why I was forced to listen to that dying Chihuahua last night."

And his smile faded. "Well, you certainly sent me flying out of your room easily enough." He reached out and began to soothingly stroke her hair.

"That was different. I have no problem casting spells when I'm angry."

Draco watched the way her eyes were always on guard. He sighed. "Give me your wand, Granger."

A second later, he felt something poking at him through the comforter. He reached under and grabbed the wand, putting up a strong Silencing Charm around the washroom.

"Do you want to go back to your room? I can cast a Darkening Charm to black out your window so you don't see the lightning."

Hermione shook her head frantically. "No. I don't want to move."

Draco nodded. He handed her wand back to her and stood up.

"Where are you going?" she asked, reaching out and grabbing his hand.

Draco looked at her. She was staring up at him pleadingly, looking almost as desperate as she had in that corridor at Hogwarts, right before his father dragged her away. He hated that look on her. "I'm just going to shut the door," he said.

Hermione reluctantly released his hand, and Draco walked to the door. Luckily, he was not gone long. When he came back, she instinctually moved so that he could climb into the tub with her. He leaned against the back of it before positioning her so she was nestled between his legs. Hermione wrapped the comforter around both of them and let herself sink into him.

"Maybe next time there's a thunderstorm, you should make a point to run into *my* loo. The tub in there is at least twice the size."

"I'll try to remember that." There was a long moment of silence before Hermione said, "I'm sorry I wrote that owl. I know it was stupid but, for some reason, I just keep doing these reckless things. It's like my mind has lost all rationality."

"It was probably just the heat of the moment," justified Draco. "But, maybe, as you're doing these 'things', you should stop and ask yourself, 'what would the old Hermione Granger do?'"

Hermione chuckled softly. "That would certainly get me thinking. The old Hermione Granger was all about rationality."

Draco smiled into Hermione's hair before moving his arms so they were wrapped around her waist. When she moved her hands to rest on top of his, he could feel that she had something in her lap.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Oh." She pulled it out from underneath the comforter so he could see. "It's that book you had Bronson get. He came by and banged on my door earlier but I didn't answer. He said he was just dropping off some stuff you asked him to pick up for me and he left them on the desk."

Draco waited, but Hermione did not say anything about the robe. She put *Hogwarts: A History* out in front of her and, even in the dark, Draco could see her fingers tracing the cover.

"Malfoy … what made you choose this book for me? Was there a reason?"

Draco put his chin on her shoulder and said, "It's your favorite, isn't it?"

He could feel Hermione tense in his arms. "How … how do you know that?"

"Well, you always had your fucking nose in it at school, didn't you?" He purposely neglected to mention that Pansy was the one who told him this. But it didn't matter. He was the one who stopped and looked at it, somehow reminded of the vague memory of it all.

Glancing sideways, he could see the faint outline of a smile on her lips.

"Do you want to read some before we go to sleep?" he asked.

Hermione's hair brushed against him as she nodded.

Draco took his wand back out and said, "*Lumos*!" He rested his arm between Hermione and the tub, holding it out so she could see the pages. As Hermione began flipping through it, he asked, "Read the chapter about when the Giant Squid broke into the Slytherin dormitories in 1682, will you? I always liked that one."

Hermione pursed her eyebrows as she turned to look at him, their faces incredibly close. "*You've* read *Hogwarts: A History*?"

"Of course I have," said Draco. "I read it just before first year and maybe three times since. If I was going to be stuck at Hogwarts for seven bloody years, I wanted to know everything. No one knows those hidden corridors like I do."

"I might," she said with a smile. "All right. I believe what we are looking for is chapter -"

"Twelve," he said with her.

Draco and Hermione only got about halfway through the chapter before they both drifted off to sleep. It was actually sort of peaceful in there, despite the unpleasant feeling from the curve of the porcelain pressing into Draco's back.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Draco woke up to the sound of a faint moan. He opened his eyes and immediately realized that he had been caressing Hermione in his sleep. One hand was gliding across her stomach on the inside of her jumper while the other was stroking the delicate area of skin just below the hem of her pajama bottoms. The moan had come from her.

Hermione's head fell back against his shoulder and Draco leaned towards her so that he could breathe in the aroma of her skin. He brushed his lips against her neck, his hand trailing down further until it reached the top of her knickers. And then his fingers just stopped, fidgeting uncomfortably with the lace he was happy to find before removing his hand completely, settling both casually around her waist. Call him old fashioned, but he preferred his women to be conscious when he groped them.

After a gentle kiss on her temple, Draco leaned his head against hers and tried to fall back asleep.

"Malfoy?" he heard her whisper a few moments later.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Would it be all right if … if I call you Draco?"

Draco smiled and said, "That would be fine, Granger." This time, he kissed her cheek before closing his eyes and drifting off one final time.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

The next morning, Draco was surprised to find himself lying in the tub alone. It had been transfigured so it was plushy and comfortable, and he had to wonder why the hell he had not thought of doing that last night. It certainly would have done his neck some favors, which was now aching and stiff.

There was a rustling coming from the kitchen and he quickly got up to investigate. He left the washroom and was more than happy to find Hermione mixing pancake batter while wearing her new blue robe. She smiled when she saw him.

"Morning, Draco. Do you want chocolate chips with your pancakes?" she asked, holding up a bag of them.

"Sure," he said, walking over to make the coffee. To his pleasant surprise, Hermione had already made it. He poured a cup and sat on the counter, watching her closely as she worked so flawlessly in the kitchen. That robe was even more appealing than he imagined. She looked so cozy in it and he was overcome with the strangest sensation to snuggle her. That was weird. He had never had any desire to snuggle a girl before.

Draco's eyes then drifted down to her feet, still clad in his too-large slippers. This would be next on his list.

Suddenly, a burst of thunder roared outside. Hermione shrieked and dropped the plate she was carrying. Draco was off of the counter in a flash and pulling her into his arms. Wow, he had been right. This robe was delightful.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking down at the plate as she hugged her arms around his waist.

"It's an easy fix," he said, nuzzling his nose into the top of her head. Merlin, how did she always smell like that?

What Draco did not realize was that Hermione was doing the same thing to him. He was always so spicy and fresh, and she took this moment to really breathe him in.

Thunder sounded again and Hermione did not even react this time. She was too caught up in the feeling of Draco's arms to even notice.

He began stroking his hand through her hair and she looked up to find him gazing down at her. His lips were slightly parted as hers did the same, both of them frozen as their eyes remained locked. Draco moved his hand from her hair to her cheek and began to slowly move inward -

But their reverie was quickly interrupted by a knock on the door. Draco looked at it before reluctantly letting Hermione go. He walked over quietly and glanced out the peephole, sighing in relief when he saw it was only Bronson. And then he noticed his black eye.

"Shit." Draco slowly opened the door. "Morning, mate!" he said brightly as Bronson stepped inside. "Quite a shiner you got there. I'm sure the prick who gave it to you must have been dreadfully intoxicated and - Ah!"

Bronson swung hard and knocked Draco over with one solid hit to the jaw.

"Draco!" Hermione screamed before running over to help him. Bronson quickly shut the door so she could not be seen.

"You. Fucking. Arse," said Bronson before rubbing at his wounded hand. "The two of you need to stop taking out your damn frustration with each other on me. I don't think my body can take much more of this."

Hermione was doting over Draco on the floor for a moment, before glancing up and taking a good look at the other wizard. "Bronson, what happened to your eye?"

"One guess," he said, looking scornfully at Draco.

"Oh." Hermione quickly let go of Draco and stood back up. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize the hit was justified. Do you want pancakes?" she asked before heading back towards the kitchen. "They're chocolate chip."

"Mmm, lovely," said Bronson while following after her, making sure to knock Draco with his foot when he passed him.

Draco groaned before standing back up. He should have known Bronson would not take what he had said the night before seriously. He supposed he should be grateful, since Bronson really did do a lot for them, but what bloody horrible timing.

# Chapter 9: Crying, Waiting, Hoping

**A/N: They're up, they're down, they're all around. Get ready for the emotional rollercoaster that is this chapter! Mwahaha!**

**Oh, these two :-)**

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For the next week, living with Hermione became very pleasant for Draco. The thunderstorms had stopped but she continued to ask him to sleep in her bed at night, which really gave him time to breathe in her intoxicating aroma.

She then woke up early every morning to make these elaborate breakfasts. Bronson taught her most of it, since he was the sous chef at a popular wizarding restaurant. His hours were random and normally in the very early hours of morning or in the evening, which was why he had so much free time in the middle of the day to spend with her, teaching her simple things that she had been deprived of learning.

Hermione claimed she had never been much of a cook before, and Draco loved the way her face lit up every time she made something he was particularly fond of, like her spinach omelet. But his favorite part about her new morning routine was the robe she always cooked in, which was now accompanied by matching slippers he had sent Bronson back for.

By the end of the week, Hermione had already read through the entire volume of *Hogwarts: A History* twice, so Draco asked her if there were any other books she might want. She filled up an entire piece of parchment with her list. Front and back.

It was definitely safe to say that Hermione Granger was getting back to normal. She even asked him for a small handbag when the Polyjuice Potion finished brewing, and taught him how to cast an Undetectable Extension Charm on it. He could see how relieved she was when the spell actually worked.

"You still have to help me practice in the basement," she said as he helped her carefully pack the finished phials of potion inside of her new, never-ending bag. "Bronson's never actually been in any sort of battle before and he really only works as a test dummy."

"So … what? You want me to teach you Death Eater tricks or something?" asked Draco.

"Well, it couldn't hurt. That way, I could at least know what they might use on me."

"I'm not letting you run out of here unless there's a one-hundred percent chance no Death Eater will go after you, Granger."

"I know," she said. "I was referring more to the future. You know, like, a battle."

Draco froze. Of course, he knew there would be more battles between the Death Eaters and the resistance in the future. In fact, he was pretty sure they were overdue for one. But the thought of Hermione being caught up in the middle of it had never really crossed his mind before. When she left here, they would become enemies again. Maybe they would even run into each other on the battlefield. Would she strike at him then? He already knew he would never strike at her. He did his best not to strike at any members of the resistance, though, sometimes, it was unavoidable.

"Fine, I'll teach you," he said. "There is one spell in particular I think you would like. We'll need Bronson for it, though. Test dummy, you know."

He winked and Hermione smiled. The two of them were just waiting for the day Bronson had enough of their shenanigans and retaliated. He, undoubtedly, had a few tricks up his own sleeve. Every witch and wizard did.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"Do I have to do this?" Bronson whined as Draco aimed Hermione's wand at him.

"You want her to learn, don't you?" said Draco. "Would you rather we sent our little fugitive out unprepared?"

"No," Bronson mumbled under his breath. "But your spells always bloody hurt."

"You won't feel a thing with this one."

Bronson let out a frustrated sigh before readying himself.

"Pay close attention, Granger. This spell will need to be cast nonverbally, but I'll say the incantation this first time to show you. Ready?"

Hermione nodded, her eyes focusing closely on the tip of her wand in Draco's hand.

"*Obstupefio*!"

She jumped as a jet of blinding green light shot out of the wand and hit Bronson straight in the heart, making his eyes go wide and still as his entire body stiffened.

He collapsed to the floor.

Hermione watched in awe, her mouth slightly agape. "It looks like the Killing Curse," she said.

"Yes, that's the point," said Draco. "That's why you have to cast it nonverbally. So any observers think that that's exactly what you did."

She sucked in her lips before nervously asking, "What do *you* use it for, Draco?"

"When I first created it, the point was to catch members of the resistance," he said. "I would cast it on them and their comrades would leave the body behind, thinking they were dead. When they awoke, we would interrogate them."

Hermione shuddered. Draco did not like it.

"But, lately, I only ever use it to stop other Death Eaters from killing them first," he said defensively.

"How long does it last?" she asked, going over to Bronson and nudging his petrified body with her foot.

"Twenty minutes or so. But I can reverse it whenever." He walked up to Bronson, pointed Hermione's wand and said, "*Evigilo.*"

Bronson popped up from the ground, gasping desperately for air. He looked at Draco with the same wide eyes as before, struggling to breathe as he said, "What … the … fuck?"

"If you awake them too suddenly, it can be a bit unsettling," said Draco with a crooked grin. He handed Hermione her wand.

Hermione bit her bottom lip as she twirled the wand between her fingertips. "I want to give it a try."

Bronson moved his wide eyes to her as he continued to catch his breath. "Wha -"

"All right but, this time, we should probably let him rest it out after. I'll teach you some other spells while he does."

Hermione nodded, and she and Draco moved back to the same spot as before. She readied her wand, but Bronson was still on the ground, clutching at his heart. He held up a finger, letting them know it would just be one second, then he stood up and braced himself.

"Okay," he said with one last gasp for air.

Draco stood behind Hermione, running his hand down her arm until his fingertips were resting on top of hers. He positioned her hand correctly, adjusting it slightly so it was aimed directly at Bronson's heart.

"It works best if you hit them straight on," he said into her ear, feeling Hermione tremble under his touch. He smirked as he rubbed his other hand soothingly along her hip. "Ready?"

Bronson cocked his head, staring curiously at the way Draco was touching Hermione, and even more curiously at the way she was leaning into it. He was still stuck like this when Hermione shouted, "*Obstupefio*!"

Bronson fell back, his head still in its tilted position. He would be feeling *that* in twenty minutes.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Draco sat around the large, wooden table with the other Death Eaters who resided in London and Lord Voldemort. They were in the Dark Lord's home and a number of Muggles in chains were serving them a plethora of food, but Draco did not want any of it. Not just because of the horrible conditions and torture the servers had to endure - even now, Bellatrix was pulling on a chain around a young woman's neck, pulling her close and burning her with her wand while she tried to pour wine without spilling a drop. No, that was only a small part of why he did not want to touch this food. The bigger part - and the more selfish one - was more focused on how Hermione was planning on cooking her first dinner tonight. She was extremely excited and nervous, and he would be damned if he came home full.

"My lord, all I want to know is what exactly has this little shit done to recapture the Mudblood bitch?" asked Rabastan.

Draco smirked. He had not even realized the conversation had become about him.

"Please do not use such tasteless language at my table, Rabastan."

"I apologize, my lord, but, surely -"

"Draco, would you care to enlighten us with your reasoning behind your decision not to send Death Eaters out to search our citizens' homes?" asked Lord Voldemort, sitting as stiffly and calmly as ever.

"It's a waste of our fucking time," said Draco, winking at Rabastan when it became

clear that the Dark Lord would not be correcting his language.

"How so?" asked Rabastan.

"Because we gain nothing by recapturing Granger. You might want retribution but, other than pissing off Potter, we have no use for her anymore."

"Speak for yourself," said Yaxley from across the table. He and Theo's father, Quincy, exchanged smirks.

It took everything Draco had to stop himself from lunging forward and beating them to a bloody pulp. Or maybe just one quick wave of his wand …

"Rodolphus, how do you feel about all of this?"

Everyone followed the Dark Lord's eyes to the wizard at the far end of the table, alive and well but his throat still terribly scarred from the cut Hermione had made there. Draco tried to hide the fire he felt as he stared at him. Rodolphus had only just returned to his duties a few days ago and Draco hated having to see his hideous face every day, even with that spasm of satisfaction he felt every time he looked at Hermione's handiwork.

Rodolphus's fists were clenched on the table, his knuckles turning white as his nails dug deep into the skin in his palm, obviously not over the humiliation of being mutilated by the Mudblood he had fallen into sickening lust with. He looked up with weary eyes and shrugged without a word.

"Speak up, dear!" Bellatrix called down to him. Even when he had been demoted to the other end, she still remained in her chair just beside Lord Voldemort. "The Dark Lord would like to know your opinion! Should we continue looking for your filthy pet, or are you fine with her slashing your throat open and, with that, obtaining her freedom?"

Well, it was clear what *her* opinion was. Anything to overrule Draco.

"Do you think she's shagging Potter right now?" she asked with a cackle.

Rodolphus leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, glaring down the table at his wife. The two of them remained in a staring contest for a long moment before Rodolphus moved his eyes to Draco. He brought his wand up to his throat, casting a spell so he could speak through his damaged throat before saying, "Find her and let me deal with her. I do not want her returning to Potter. *Ever.*"

"You *do* plan on killing her, darling, don't you?" asked Bellatrix with a wicked smile.

"In time," Rodolphus said. "But, first, she must suffer." He lowered his wand.

Draco noticed as several of the Death Eaters exchanged satisfied smirks. He knew what they were thinking. That they would *all* make Hermione suffer, but he would kill every last one of them before he ever let that happen. It repulsed him how many people in this room had had their way with her without her consent. He wished he could kill them all now. It would certainly be gratifying. But this was not the time or place. Hermione would get her vengeance. Just not today.

"You heard the man, Draco," said Bellatrix with a smile. "Send out the search party."

Draco rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "Waste of fucking time, but fine. You win, Rabastan." He scowled at the other wizard, determined to wipe that satisfied smirk off of his face. "But, when we don't find her, I want something in return," he said.

The smirk vanished. Mission accomplished.

"What did you have in mind, Draco?" asked Lord Voldemort.

"This is not the first time Rabastan has taken away my precious time. I am sure we all recall that bloody mission to Godric's Hollow last year. We lost three Death Eaters and a werewolf while there when the resistance bombarded us, and all because he was not smart enough to recognize a false fucking lead."

Everyone nodded in remembrance. Actually, the lead was not false, and Draco was the one who used the Imperius Curse on a resistance member to get a message to them about the Death Eaters' arrival, but no one here knew that. In fact, no one at all did.

"If he is wrong again, I want him out. Not an execution. Just out." Really, he wanted an execution, but he was trying to be realistic.

Rabastan's eyes widened. "You little fucking shit. How dare you -"

"Done," said the Dark Lord. "I suggest you work closely with Draco on this, Rabastan. Your future with us depends on it."

Rabastan looked at Lord Voldemort and gulped before nodding. Then he moved his angry eyes back to Draco, keeping them focused on him for the remainder of the meeting.

"Now, onto our next order of business," said Bellatrix, looking at a piece of

parchment in front of her. "Has no one still heard from Marcus Flint?"

Keeping Rabastan's gaze, Draco smirked. It was all too fucking easy.

<p align="center">XXX</p>

"So how does it look?" Hermione asked nervously as Bronson carefully inspected the stew she had made.

"Looks good," he said, giving it a few stirs. He took out a spoonful and blew on it before stuffing it into his mouth. "Mmm. Not bad. Of course, mine is better."

"I suspect it is," she said with a smile. "So it's really all right? I had this horrible fear that the meat would come out raw or something."

Bronson laughed. "You *know* it's not raw, Hermione. Stop being so insecure. It tastes great."

"I can't help it. I've never done anything like this before and I strive for perfection. Anything less and I'm dumping it down the drain."

"In that case, it's perfect," he said with a wink.

Hermione went over to the pot and took her own bite. It was not perfect, but it was still pretty good. Maybe she could forgo the drain. "Do you think Draco will like it?"

Bronson's smile faded. "I'm sure he will," he said coldly before going back to stirring. "Hermione … when did you start calling Malfoy by his first name?"

"A little over a week ago," she answered nonchalantly. "Why?"

"Nothing. It's just … is there any particular reason *why* you no longer call him by his surname?"

"Of course there is."

Bronson pursed his lips. "Okay … I guess I'll be blunt. *Why*, Hermione?"

Hermione shrugged before checking on the vegetables she was steaming. "I have some history with his family, and I wanted to separate him from them."

"*Why*?"

"You ask that a lot."

"I know, I just …" Bronson sighed heavily into the pot. "I'm concerned for you. I know Malfoy has helped you out a lot. He's helped me too. But people like us … we can never forget who *he* is."

"Are you saying he's bad?" she asked, focusing very intently on her vegetables.

"No, of course not. We both know he isn't. But he certainly isn't good."

Hermione stared dazedly for a moment before saying, "I know."

"And I don't want you to … confuse your feelings for him, I suppose. I don't know the extent of what you've been through, and I actually prefer it that way, but I know no one has been kind to you in years and you should make sure you don't … mistake gratitude with … with something else."

Hermione finally looked over at him and frowned. "I really wish you would stop beating around the bush and just say whatever is on your -"

"Don't shag Malfoy."

Hermione's eyes popped. "What?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Hermione. For the past couple of weeks, he has been angry and jealous, and I'm pretty sure he felt you up right in front of me in the basement the other day."

"He was not feeling me up, Bronson. He was helping me."

"Okay, sure. The wand hand I can understand. But the hip? He was, like, caressing it."

"He wasn't -"

"Malfoy wants you, Hermione. Plain and simple. And, from the looks of it, you want him too."

Hermione blushed and looked away. "I … I don't. I know it's been a long time but, when Ron and I parted, we were sort of together. It's not that I expect him to have waited for me or anything, but I … I guess I sort of hope that he did. I wouldn't compromise that when I'm so close to getting him back."

"I hope that's true," said Bronson, putting the lid back on the pot. "Because I *know* the git you live with has a few tricks up his sleeve. Malfoy's used to getting what he wants. Who knows what lengths he'll go to -"

"Draco would *never* do anything without my consent."

"But he might push."

"And I am fully capable of saying no, Bronson. You don't have to worry about me. I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you're right," he said while turning towards her. "I have to go now, but I'm sure your dinner is going to be great."

Bronson pulled Hermione's head in and kissed the top of it affectionately before heading for the front door.

"Just be careful about what you serve for dessert."

Hermione chuckled and rolled her eyes.

Bronson reached the door and opened it. "Oh! I almost forgot!" He turned back to her one last time and tossed her something from his pocket.

She smiled as she caught what she could now see was a chocolate frog.

"Happy Halloween, Hermione. Next year, let's go trick-or-treating. Muggle style."

Her heart suddenly feeling heavy, Hermione managed to maintain her smile and nod. "That would be nice."

But she knew the chances of that happening were very slim. The war would have to be over, Voldemort would have to be defeated, and the world would have to somehow be restored to what it once was. No amount of magic could change all of that in a year. It was just not possible.

Bronson left then, forcing Hermione to be alone with her thoughts. While she had tried really hard to deny it before, a part of her was starting to wonder if she really did want Draco. Every line was fuzzy when it came to him, and this was one of the fuzziest. She wanted to believe that any feelings she might have were real, but how could she be sure? Draco was all she knew, all she had been around for over a month now. Other than Bronson, who hardly counted.

But these feelings she was having … How could she trust them? Every day, she found herself thinking less about Ron and more about Draco. He was slowly taking over her mind and she did not like it.

The night the two of them had spent in the bathtub together, Hermione had woken

up to Draco touching her. He had stopped, of course, the moment he realized what he was doing, but Hermione was not completely sure she had wanted him to stop. For the first time in years, it had felt good to have someone there … touching her. Much like that feeling she got while kissing him on his washroom floor.

It was hers. All of it.

Him, the moment, the feelings, the choice.

Especially the choice.

She had chosen not to stop him. Both times. Until she saw the Dark Mark on his arm, and was reminded of who he was. A Death Eater. Favorite to Lord Voldemort. Nephew to Bellatrix and Rodolphus. Son to Lucius. A Malfoy. He was all of these things and she hated it. But she did not hate him. Not in the slightest.

Hermione gulped and sucked in her lips as she tried to fight back her tears. She was sick of crying.

Grabbing a bottle of firewhiskey from one of the cabinets, Hermione went over to the sofa and slumped down onto it. She opened the bottle and began drinking straight from it, her eyes constantly drifting over to that photo on the bookcase. The one where she had covered Lucius. This was *his* fault. She could look past Draco's involvement with Bellatrix, Rodolphus and even Lord Voldemort, but not *him*. Not his father whom he resembled so strongly.

But there were differences. Differences she found herself becoming more and more aware of every day. There were his eyes, of course, and skin slightly tanner, a build slightly smaller, a nose with less of a sharp edge and the faint traces of freckles sprinkled across it. And she could never forget about that smile, with crooked lips and something else, something mischievous that let her know he was plotting. Always plotting. Now she smiled.

Lucius did not have a smile like that. She was not even sure if he had one at all. If he did, she had certainly never seen it.

"I hate you," she whispered while staring at the blank piece of parchment covering a small spot on the photo. "I hate you," she said again. And then her eyes drifted to Draco, small and happy as he leaned into his mother, that same crooked smile lighting up his entire face. "I wish I hated you."

It definitely would have made things easier if she did.

Draco watched curiously as some slave helped Rodolphus into his cloak. He remembered her. She was the one who had turned in the old woman who gave Hermione the knife, claiming someone during the slave trade carriage ride had informed her of what she had done. Her only request for this piece of information was that she be given to Rodolphus permanently. The Dark Lord had complied, of course, forcing Rodolphus to take her in, even after he claimed he did not want her.

Still, she doted on him, even as he pushed her away, smacking her hard across the face before storming off. She only took a second to rub the wound before scurrying after him. Until this moment, Draco had never seen Rodolphus physically abuse a slave before. He had always been more interested in doing other things to them, but never hitting, never cursing. The bruises on this girl's arms and face were a good indication that he had done both.

"Pathetic, isn't it?"

Draco looked over to see Theo standing beside him.

"Somehow brainwashing the unwilling to become the willing by doing something simple like *not* torturing them. And, now, look at her, being treated the same by him as all the others but, still, she begs to stay. I will never understand slaves."

"They're not all like that," said Draco. "That one … she was weak. But he never got any of the others. He never got Granger."

A pause.

"You know, you're the only one who ever calls her that. Granger."

Draco glanced sideways at him, noticing the faint hint of a smile on Theo's lips.

"Everyone else just calls her Potter's Mudblood."

"You don't. And neither does Pansy."

"I don't call her anything," said Theo. "I suppose it's probably because we all went to school with her, so we see her as mildly more than just something belonging to Potter. Do you really not believe we're going to find her, or is it something else?"

"What else, Theo?" asked Draco, staying composed but feeling slightly nervous about what his old friend was getting at.

"I was just thinking that, since we went to school with her, you might actually have a soft spot for Granger. That's what my father believes, anyway. I told him I didn't think so, but his theory is not without its valid arguments. You're being soft. We can all see it."

Draco took a deep breath. "I could care less about Granger, Theo," he said. "But you're right. Her escape … since I know her, it does feel more personal. I don't care for Rodolphus and I wish she was successful in disposing of him."

Theo turned his head and watched Draco, his mouth agape.

"But, from what I've heard about her, her mind has become completely fucked," continued Draco. "The Granger we knew would never stab someone in cold blood. Her brain was her most prized possession and it's been destroyed. She's no more use to Potter than she is to us now. Executing her … that would be easy, but, if we don't find her, she has to live with the repercussions of what we did for the rest of her life. Would you not agree that that is punishment enough?"

Theo closed his fallen jaw and pursed his lips. "I never heard anything about her mind being fucked."

"Then you should ask Alecto Carrow about Granger's stay with her just before her escape. That might put a few things into perspective for you."

Draco moved to walk away, but Theo quickly called him back.

"Where the fuck you think you're going? It's Halloween, remember?"

"So?"

"*Soooo,*" Theo said dramatically, "we *always* go to the pub together on Halloween. You know, get sloshed, pick up a few women dressed up in those slutty Muggle costumes. It's tradition. Goyle is already out getting us a carriage for the night so we don't have to take that bloody Knight Bus."

"I don't feel like fucking going out," said Draco, his mind instantly drifting to Hermione and the dinner she was making.

"Or shagging?"

Draco shrugged his shoulders.

"Again?" said Theo, sounding absolutely appalled. "Seriously, mate, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Draco shrugged again.

"You have a bloody girlfriend or something?"

"What?" said Draco, turning to him with disdain. "Of course not! I'm just sick of my fucking routine. Is that really so unbelievable?"

"For anyone else, no. But you?"

Draco looked over and noticed Rabastan still sitting at the table with Alecto Carrow, Yaxley, Macnair and Arron Greengrass. They were all watching him closely, obviously trying to listen in on his and Theo's conversation. At least they had started out speaking softly.

Draco kept himself poised on the outside, but he was frowning deeply on the inside. It was unfortunate, but he had been given a part and he had to play it.

"Fine, Theo. I'll go. But I'm not staying for fucking long. I'm tired and I want to get home."

And he really, *really* wanted to get home. He hated that being a Death Eater meant Hermione's dinner would have to wait, but he needed to keep her safe and acting like his usual self was beyond necessary. Draco could not give anyone a reason to doubt him. If he did and his status dropped, the benefits he was given by being the Dark Lord's favorite might be taken away, and his home would no longer be the safe haven he had made for her. And, what more, he really was not ready for her to go yet.

"Good. Glad you came to your senses," said Theo, putting a hand on Draco's shoulder. "Now, let's get the fuck out of here."

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

It was hell. The whole fucking night was hell.

All Draco wanted to do was get the fuck home, but *they* made it next to impossible. Not Theo or Goyle. They were both fine. In fact, Theo disappeared to the inn upstairs early on in the evening and did not return for over an hour. And Draco was still stuck there when he did. Because of *them*. Rabastan, Yaxley and Macnair. All there, and all watching Draco closely, eager to see some sort of screw up or change in his personality that might be used against him, to get the Dark Lord to question his trust in him.

But he would not give them the satisfaction.

Draco found a witch, a fairly attractive one dressed as a sexy Quidditch player in short robes that showed off her long legs. She was completely enthralled by his Dark Mark and wanted to know all about being a Death Eater. It was actually this mark that got so many women to come home with him so often. For anyone who lived in this city, it represented a sense of security. If these women could bed a Death Eater and then keep him coming back for more, perhaps they could get him to protect them if need be. Little did they know, there 'cleverly' devised plan was wasted on Draco Malfoy. He had no interest in any of these women beyond one night.

Watching closely as the girl stroked the mark with her fingers, Draco could not help but find it curious how the tattoo that made so many women want him, beg for him even, was the same thing that made Hermione push him away. The one woman he actually wanted to have in his bed tonight.

Thinking of Hermione, sitting alone in his flat with whatever dinner she had prepared, made Draco sick. He stood up and pushed this woman off of his lap, which she had been straddling.

"You out of here, Malfoy?" asked Theo as a different girl than the one he had gone upstairs with earlier sucked on his neck.

"I did my time," said Draco, taking a large swig from the bottle of mead on their table before heading for the door.

He was practically outside before he realized that the girl who had been so intrigued by his mark was following him.

"What are you doing?" he asked when they got out to the curb.

"I'm coming with you," she said grabbing his arm and stretching up to try to kiss him.

Draco turned so she hit his jaw instead. "I'm not interested."

"I bet I could change your mind." She moved her hand downwards and began rubbing at the cloth of his cloak, just over his groin.

He pulled back. "I don't know what the fuck you think you're going to get out of this, but you should know that no slag gets more than one turn in my bed."

The girl moved towards him again and full on cupped him in her hand. "I'm not looking for more than one turn," she whispered seductively into his ear.

"Get the fuck off -"

"Evening, Draco. Leaving so soon?"

Draco glanced over the girl's head to see Rabastan standing there with his own young witch clinging to his arm.

Draco's nostrils flared as he stared back at the man and nodded. "I have other plans for my night." With your brother's attempted murderer and object of lust, he thought. For some reason, he found great satisfaction in that.

"Yes, I can see," said Rabastan as his eyes drifted to the girl still clinging to Draco. "Would the two of you like a ride?"

Right on cue, a Thestral-drawn carriage flew out of the sky and landed on the street in front of them.

"No, we're -"

"Oh, yes, please!" said the girl excitedly as she pulled an unprepared Draco into the carriage with her. He tried to jump back out, but Rabastan was behind him now, prodding him in.

Once inside, Draco could see that they were not alone. Rodolphus was sitting in the far corner, his chin on his palm as he stared dazedly out the window. His slave girl was sitting next to him with her hand soothingly stroking his thigh.

While Draco stared, the girl he was with pulled him into a seat across from them.

"Thank you for this," she said as soon as Rabastan was in and seated beside his brother's slave, pulling his girl onto his lap. Draco noticed her slip her hands beneath his robes and then heard the sound of trousers being undone. His face recoiled in disgust.

"Is there any particular reason for your generosity, Rabastan?" he asked. "I have a hard time believing, after our encounter earlier, that you have any interest in doing me a favor."

"You're right. I don't," said Rabastan, his eyes rolling back in his head as the girl on his lap so obviously stroked him. "You and I are long overdue for a talk, young Malfoy."

"You will not speak down to me, Rabastan. I am your superior and you will call me Malfoy alone or nothing at all. You understand?" said Draco, taking out his wand

and tapping it on his knee.

Rabastan smirked. "I do not wish to fight with you, Draco."

"Malfoy!"

"Fine. *Malfoy*. I am not sure when this animosity between us began but -"

"Three years ago. You filed a petition at the Ministry to have my father executed for his failures during the war. I am sure you recall."

"I would have an easier time believing that is where this all began if you actually liked your father."

"You're right, I hate the prick. But he's still my father and, thanks to *his* wife," he pointed his wand at Rodolphus, who finally turned away from the window and looked at him, "he's the only parent I have left."

"Yes, that would truly be a shame if you lost your *only* parent."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Are you threatening -"

"Of course I am. You have left me no choice."

"You have had plenty of choices -"

"Shut your mouth, you annoying little prick!"

Draco raised his eyebrows.

"I have worked too fucking hard to get into the Dark Lord's good graces to simply be pushed out by bloody child on a power trip!"

The carriage pulled to a halt and Draco looked out the window to see his building.

"*Accio keys*!"

His keys flew out of his pocket and into Rabastan's hand. He dangled them in front of the girl still on Draco's arm.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but, I am afraid, I must request a bit more of your male companion's time. Top floor, only flat there. These keys and a simple wave of your wand will get you in. I'll make sure to send him up shortly."

The girl happily took the keys and jumped out of the carriage. Draco tried to follow

after her but Rabastan grabbed him and tossed him back in, causing him to hit his head hard against the back window.

"These threats don't go over well with me, Rabastan. All you're doing is making me angrier. If you're not careful, I just might -"

Rabastan pushed the girl off of his lap and set her on her knees in front of him. He threw his robes over her head while simultaneously pulling something out of his pocket.

"What's that?" asked Draco, eyeing what appeared to be a small, coin-sized crest.

"I believe you are familiar with the Lestrange family crest, are you not?"

Draco looked at him and gave a shallow nod.

"Several of us Death Eaters have been talking, the originals of course, not your fucked up miniature generation, and we all agree that it is time for your reign to end."

"Is that so?" Draco said with a smirk.

"Yes, it is, and we have also agreed that sacrifices must be made to keep you under control."

Draco frowned. "I don't understand what that has to do with -"

"This crest has been bewitched with a Protean Charm, so all of us *original* purebloods have one."

"Really?" said Draco, cocking an eyebrow. "How'd you manage that one without the Dark Lord knowing?"

"There are always ways, young Malfoy," said Rabastan before exchanging a smirk with his brother.

Draco rolled his eyes. "And what exactly do you plan to do with this connection?" he asked, knowing very well that a Protean Charm linked objects together.

"Like I said. Everyone has agreed to make sacrifices. We have compiled a list of everything most dear to you and we plan to dispose of everything on it. One by one. One flick of with my wand and the first thing's gone." He took out his wand and tapped it. "That would be your father. Plenty of pureblooded wizards live right near the manor, and all are just dying to take a shot at him. Second." Another tap.

"That's Theo. His father has already agreed to take care of it. Anything for the greater good. Third." Tap. "Gregory's father has agreed to the same. Need I go on?"

"You're bluffing," spat Draco, sneering at him from across the carriage.

"Am I? Well, what do you say, brother?" He turned to Rodolphus. "Shall we test it out then?" The tip of his wand lit up. He slowly began moving it towards the crest.

"Stop!" shouted Draco, holding out his hand.

Rabastan smiled triumphantly before putting his wand away.

"You certainly went to a lot of trouble," spat Draco. "Dare I ask what it is you want?"

Rabastan looked at his brother and motioned for him to continue. Rodolphus brought his wand up to his damaged throat and used it to say, "Find the Mudblood. She needs to be punished for the embarrassment she has caused our family."

"I believe that embarrassment is all your own," Draco quipped. "You both know as well as I do that, even if we go door to fucking door, there's practically no chance that we're going to find her."

"Then torture everyone until you find someone who knows where she has gone!" shouted Rodolphus, his face turning bright crimson. "I don't care how you do it, just fucking find her!"

Rodolphus lowered his wand and rubbed at his throat. He had strained it with the yelling. His slave beside him gave it a kiss and, for once, he let her try to please him.

"You're both fucking pathetic," said Draco, moving for the exit and having to step over the girl under Rabastan's robes to get to the door. He slammed it behind him and watched as the carriage took off into the sky. "Fucking bastards."

XXX

Hermione was sitting in her room, still holding the half-drunken bottle of firewhiskey as she listened closely to the radio. Draco had not come home and she just knew something had to have happened. She began to hyperventilate as the static continued, crying as she took another sip out of the bottle. She did not know what she was waiting for. Perhaps some notification that there had been a battle, and that Death Eaters had been killed. Of course, they would never say the

names. No members of the resistance cared about such a thing, but maybe it would give her some idea, some indication that he was not all right.

What if he was dead? What would she do? Just leave? Hide underground or in Bronson's bedroom and act like none of this ever happened? She could not just forget about Draco like that. He deserved more.

Finally, Hermione heard the front door open. She jumped off of her bed and ran for it, but stopped when she realized the footsteps were lighter than usual.

Hermione brought her ear up to the door and listened as someone walked leisurely through the flat, pausing every few moments to - what she assumed - look at something. And then they started humming. A high-pitched, sweet sounding, *female* hum.

Hermione went red as something inside of her burned.

The girl walking through the flat then opened a door that Hermione immediately recognized as the washroom. She shut it just as quickly before heading to the next one, which was Draco's room.

There was a loud, "Oooh," followed by a fit of giggles. Hermione listened as the girl's light footsteps headed inside.

She stepped back from the door, nostrils flaring as she realized what was going on here. The reason Draco had not come home was because he was out picking up some … some fucking *slag*! He had her worried sick for nothing! *And,* more importantly, he had missed her dinner! Something she had worked so hard on for him!

Hermione froze.

For *him*? When had her wanting to make dinner for the first time become about *him*?

Suddenly, the front door opened again, and the familiar sounds of Draco kicking off his shoes and hanging his cloak entered her ears.

The sound of him walking across the flat to his bedroom set a fire off in Hermione that she had not felt in a long time. Oh, he was not going to get away with this! Bringing some slag here tonight!

She ran over to her bewitched bag and immediately began digging through it, completely ignoring the voices coming from the other side of the wall. It was time

for her to put Draco *fucking* Malfoy in his place!

XXX

Noticing his bedroom door was open, Draco went right to it after hanging his cloak and kicking off his shoes. He was glad to see there was no bloodshed, and that Hermione had most likely been in her room when this annoying slag, who would not go away, came up here.

"Ahh!" Draco screamed as he found the girl lying in nothing but her underwear on his bed.

"Is your business all finished?" she asked, not the least bit fazed by his reaction.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he asked, picking up her clothes from the floor and tossing them at her. "How many times do I have to fucking say, I'm not interested?"

"What? But you brought me here!" she said, tossing her clothes back on the floor.

It was only then that Draco noticed her shoes by his dresser. He went and picked them up. "Did you *wear* these across my white fucking carpet?" he yelled, his eyes bulging out of his skull.

"They're just shoes," she said, climbing off of the bed and taking them from him. She threw them back on the ground. "Now, I believe you are wearing far too much clothing." The girl reached out and began pulling at his jumper, but Draco pulled back.

The two of them were in the midst of this wrestling match, and Draco was just about to pick her up and carry her outside of his flat in nothing but her knickers, when he heard the door to the guestroom click open. They both froze.

"What the *hell* is this?" called a voice Draco did not recognize.

He turned to see a honey-blonde girl he was pretty sure he had shagged once standing in his doorway. His forehead crinkled as he stared at her curiously.

"Who are you?" asked the girl, who had finally let go of his jumper.

"Who am I?" said this new girl Draco was still trying to place. "*Who* am *I*? *I* am his wife!"

Draco cocked his head. Funny. He did not remember having a wife.

"Who *the fuck* are you?" his 'wife' demanded, looking heatedly at the other girl.

"Oh. I'm sorry," she said, holding her hands up defensively. "I didn't realize you were married."

"Well, he is! Now, get the fuck out!"

The girl paused, putting her hands on her hips as she stared this new witch up and down. "I don't suppose you two would be up for a little three-way?"

Draco raised his eyebrows. Well, that sounded intriguing. He looked at his 'wife' just as she began to roll her eyes. His face dropped.

Under his breath, he muttered, "You fucking little -"

"Get out!" his 'wife' demanded again, pointing the other girl towards the door.

"Okay, okay," she said, grabbing her clothes and shoes off of the floor before heading for the front door. She put everything on quickly and gave the weird couple one last onceover before exiting.

"Granger?" said Draco as soon as she was gone.

The new witch crossed her arms in a fashion he had become quite accustomed to. "Obviously."

"Granger, what the fuck are you doing?" he shouted. "That Polyjuice Potion is for your escape! And who the fuck are you?"

"What, you mean you don't recognize her? You barely shagged her a month ago!" said Hermione, once again rolling her borrowed eyes.

Draco went stiff. "And how exactly did you get the fucking hair of some slag I shagged?"

"I took it, Draco! I've taken one from almost all of the girls you've brought back here!"

Draco's face distorted in disgust. "Ew! Granger, that's sick!"

"I am fully aware of that! But I was preparing! What good is Polyjuice Potion without a face to take on?"

"Seriously, what the fuck are you doing, Granger? *Why* did you do that just now?"

he demanded.

"Because *you* should not be rewarded for worrying me!"

"*What*?"

"You didn't come home, Draco! You didn't come home and I was worried! Not once, NOT ONCE in all of my time here have you not come home when you said you were going to! What was I supposed to think? *Huh*?"

"I worried you?" repeated Draco, in a bit of a daze as he searched this strange girl's blue eyes for a piece of Hermione behind them.

"Of course you did! I thought you were dead!"

"I … I'm sor -"

"But then I come to find out that you were perfectly fine! You were perfectly fine and you sent some *slag* up here to prepare herself for you! What if I had been in the front room?"

"I know, but I'm not the one who sent her -"

"I mean it's all so bloody ridiculous!"

"Granger."

"You're nothing but a selfish, inconsiderate, spoiled little cockroach!" shouted Hermione, turning bright red in her borrowed face.

Draco could feel his heart begin to slow. Those were harsh words coming from her wholesome mouth, and he hated that they were directed at him.

Staring into these flaming, unfamiliar eyes, Draco took a deep breath and said, "Sounds to me like you're jealous." He immediately knew that this was the wrong thing to say.

Hermione's eyebrows rose so high, they were practically in this stranger's blonde hairline. "*What*?"

"You heard me," he said. The words were already out. He might as well stand by them. "If you were paying any fucking attention then you would know that I was trying to get her the fuck out, but you were too distracted taking your bloody potion. If you were *that* worried about me, then wouldn't you think you would just

be happy to find out I was alive?"

"I … I was," said Hermione, blushing in her foreign skin.

"Then admit it."

"Admit what?"

"Admit that this non-Hermione, rash thing that you did is because you're jealous. Just like the last fucking thing."

"The last -?"

"The fucking letter, Granger! The letter you wrote to Parkinson! We both know that was *not* just about your scars!"

"Well, what else could it possibly be about, Draco?" she said, standing up straight and holding his firm gaze with her own.

"You *know*! You fucking know, Granger! Just admit it!"

"No."

"ADMIT IT!" he repeated louder.

"NO!" she repeated, matching his tone. "I am NOT jealous, Draco! I … I love Ron! And me and you … this whole twisted arrangement is just a matter of convenience! It doesn't mean anything!"

"Really?" said Draco, crossing his own arms. "So me sleeping in your bed every night. That means nothing?"

"Yes."

"And the night I held you during the thunderstorm. Also nothing?"

"That's right."

"And that … that kiss in my washroom. It really meant nothing to you?"

Hermione finally tore her gaze away from his, letting her eyes fall to the floor. "You said yourself that you feed off of vulnerable girls, Draco. And, that night, we were both vulnerable."

Draco took a step back as he felt like someone had punched a hole in his chest.

Hermione had his heart in the palm of her fucking hand and she was literally squeezing the life out of it. "You're saying I took advantage of you," he said in a strained voice.

"No," she said quickly. "I'm saying we took advantage of each other. We're both lonely, Draco, and we're stuck here. Together. In these closed quarters, it's easy to misconstrue feelings. We just need to learn to recognize them for what they are."

Draco gulped. "And what's that?"

Finally, Hermione looked back at him, her borrowed eyes finally returning to their usual color, and she said, "Nothing. They're nothing, Draco."

Draco quickly turned away from her and sucked in his lips. His nails dug into his arms as he tried to fight off any visible signs of what he was feeling. The heart she had been squeezing was now crushed. Nothing but dust in the palms of her hands.

"Fine," he said through gritted teeth as his eyes clenched shut. "If that's how you feel then you won't mind if I go out and find a *new* slag to bring home. After all, you're going to need another fucking hair."

Opening his eyes and keeping them cast to the floor, Draco walked forward and out of his room, making sure to knock her shoulder as he passed.

"You're going out now?" she asked, her hurried footsteps following after him.

"Looks like it," he said, taking his cloak out of the closet.

"But it's only two hours until curfew."

"Then I better be quick about it," he said, giving her a swift wink before looking away again.

"Draco, wait! I -"

"I'm sick of fucking waiting, Granger. I've been trying to do the whole fucking respectful thing but, now that I know where you stand, there's not much point anymore, is there?" His cloak now on, Draco reached down and began slipping into his shoes.

"I … I didn't mean -"

"Don't try to fucking change your answer on me now. It's done." Last shoe on, Draco opened the door. He turned back, smiled and said, "Happy fucking Halloween," before slamming the door behind him.

There was a pub only a few blocks from Draco's flat and he headed straight there. Once inside, he was immediately met by an abundance of women in sexy costumes, all eyeing him as he entered. He rolled up his sleeves so they could see the mark on his arm. This only struck more interest from their sick, feeble minds.

Draco did not know what he was looking for in a companion tonight, but he definitely knew what he was not looking for. A girl dressed in a black dress and pointed hat, like a Muggle witch, came over to him first. She was pretty and blonde and he immediately dismissed her.

Then he moved onto a brunette in a costume he did not even really look at. He came up behind her and instantly started sucking on her ear, only to be thrown off by the strong scent of too much perfume. It was wrong. All wrong.

They all smelled wrong. Every last one of them. Where were the women with the natural, floral aromas?

And then he saw her. Sitting in a chair and chatting with a friend was a simple girl with curly, brown hair and light-brown eyes. She was more made-up than he wanted, with too much makeup on her face and product in her hair, but weren't they all? So he grabbed her hand, pulled her into him and immediately sunk his head into her neck. Perfume was present, but it was not overpowering in any way. And it was floral and feminine and everything he needed to pretend.

It was not long before Draco was snogging this girl senseless against the wall. She moaned into his hair as he kissed down her neck.

There was no protesting as Draco grabbed her wrist and pulled her out of the pub, practically dragging her all the way back to his flat. The moment they got inside, he kicked off his shoes and demanded that she do the same. She obeyed and watched closely as Draco tore off his cloak, randomly tossing it aside.

He picked her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist, the two of them snogging fervently as he carried her towards his bedroom, making sure to slam the door loudly behind them, just in case Hermione was not already aware of their presence.

But, of course, she was. Hermione sat up in her bed the moment she heard the front door open, hoping since Draco had not left too long ago he had come back

alone. It did not take her long to realize that he hadn't.

She moved to the edge of her bed and just sat there, unable to tear her ears away as he so clearly began to touch his guest.

Hermione did not even realize she was crying until she felt the drops fall onto her hands, which were gripping tightly onto her pajama bottoms. *His* pajama bottoms. She reached one hand up and wiped her cheeks. They were completely soaked and she began to whimper.

"Stop crying," she demanded to herself. Nothing happened. "Stop crying," she repeated. She cried harder. "Please, please stop crying."

Hermione grabbed her wand and tried to cast a Silencing Charm, but it was too late. Her mind was already distressed.

Without another thought, Hermione stood up and grabbed her bottle of firewhiskey from off of the dresser. She took several gulps from it before leaving her bedroom. She grabbed her favorite blanket from off of the sofa and wrapped it around her, but even its warmth could not bring back the comfort she had just lost.

Hermione wiped at her eyes some more as she went out to the balcony, lying down on the cold cement and trying hard not to let her mind wander back to what was happening inside.

Still, the tears flowed, and she was starting to wonder if they would ever stop. She took another sip from her bottle.

"Stop crying," she repeated again. "This is what you wanted. You can't be attached to him. You have to leave one day. You have to find Harry and Ron. You love Ron. You can't … you can't have feelings for Draco. You just … you can't. You can't."

Back inside, Draco was having a hard time focusing, since the girl he was currently thrusting into kept fucking staring at him. So he turned her around and took her from behind, tangling one hand in her curly hair before tearing it away. There was too much of some fucking product in there. It wasn't natural, it wasn't soft, it was wrong. It was all fucking wrong.

"Granger …" he said under his breath as he continued to shag this complete stranger.

"W-what?" the girl asked over her shoulder between heavy pants.

"Nothing. Turn the fuck back around!"

She moved her head so it was once again facing forward.

Draco did not know what he had to imagine to finish that night, but it certainly had nothing to do with the girl he was shagging. He remembered mumbling something to her to get her the fuck out of his flat, but he could not for the life of him remember what it was. He supposed it was the wife lie again. That one always worked well for him.

Then, as soon as she was gone, he sat on the edge of his bed and held his head in his hands, breathing shallowly as it finally hit him. What. The. Fuck. Had. He. Just. Done?

With a frustrated growl, Draco grabbed his nightstand and tossed it across the room. Then he grabbed his chair, his comforter, his curtains. Anything he could get his fucking hands on. He threw it, he shattered it, he stomped on it, he tore it, he destroyed it.

"FUCK! You fucking pathetic bastard! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He grabbed his clock, the only object still in one piece, and threw it hard against the wall.

Once he was satisfied enough with the destruction of his room, Draco put on some clothes and grabbed his cigarettes. He headed for the balcony, pausing momentarily by Hermione's door. He desperately wanted to knock on it, to have everything be all right and have her follow him out there. But, if he knocked now, he knew very well that this is not what would happen, so he walked on, his throat feeling raw as he let it sink in how massively he had fucked up.

Draco opened the door to the balcony and was immediately met with some sort of barrier.

Looking down, he found a small body wrapped in nothing but a thin blanket. There was an empty bottle of firewhiskey in her hand and the faint remnants of tears on her familiar cheeks. The Polyjuice Potion had completely worn off.

"Granger!" Draco collapsed to his knees and rolled her so her head was in his lap. "Granger, what happened? Are you all right?"

There was some incoherent mumbling that he somehow translated to mean she could not cast a spell on her room.

With a heavy sigh, Draco scooped her into his arms and carried her frozen body inside.

"Mmm … Draco …" she whispered as she rubbed her cheek into his chest. "Smells like you …"

Draco kissed the top of her head and breathed her in. He had not recognized it before, but *this* was the scent he had been craving. So sweet. So intoxicating.

Tightening his grip on her, Draco opened the door to her bedroom and headed inside. He lowered Hermione carefully onto her bed and wrapped the comforter tightly around her.

"Draco … No more slags …" whispered Hermione with a heavy sigh.

Draco smirked. He moved his hand to her cheek and stroked it soothingly. "All right, Granger. You win. No more slags."

She smiled pleasantly before bringing her hand up to touch his.

Draco leaned in towards her ear and whispered, "Only you," before moving his lips to hers and kissing them softly.

Even in her half-asleep, drunken state, Hermione's lips still responded. Draco smiled and pressed his forehead against hers.

"Stay," she breathed into his hovering mouth.

"I can't stay, Granger. Not tonight. I don't deserve you tonight."

"Stay," she said again, opening her eyes slightly and looking into his.

"Soon," said Draco giving her another soft kiss.

And then it took everything he had to tear himself away from her, but he knew he had to do it.

Sometimes, Hermione acted so normal that Draco forgot about everything she had been through. When he actually stopped to think for a moment, he understood her hesitance about him, but he knew these feelings were not his own. She felt it too. And now, more than ever, he was determined to make her see. Hermione Granger was going to be his. He was sure of it.

And, no matter what it took, he was going to deserve her.

# Chapter 10: I'll Get You

**A/N: I promised a longer chapter and boy did I deliver. I don't normally like making them this long, but we'll just consider this my beginning of the month/MY birthday month gift to you. You're welcome. :o)**

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Hermione woke up the next morning with a horrible throbbing in her head. She groaned and rubbed it, accidentally rolling so she landed in the large puddle of drool on her pillow.

"Gross," she said before quickly moving, only making her head pound even more.

As she turned in the other direction, away from the drool, the memories of the night before suddenly came flooding back to her. Her face crinkled with curiosity as she realized she did not remember returning to her room. Had she come back here on her own? Somehow, she doubted it.

A nauseating smell that made her stomach churn currently filled the air, and it was soon accompanied by some very cheerful humming. She got up to investigate, stumbling slightly on her wobbly legs.

Hermione grabbed her robe off of the chair she had tossed it on and slid into her slippers. She yawned heavily and walked out of the room while scratching an itch at the top of her head. It was only then that she realized how incredibly tangled her hair was.

"Morning, sunshine!"

She stopped and looked to see Bronson smiling cheerfully at her from the kitchen.

"Or should I say afternoon?" He laughed before going back to cooking whatever it was he had on the stove.

Hermione groaned before going over and sinking onto the sofa. Not even ten seconds later, Bronson was handing her a glass filled with a hideous, muggy-green liquid.

"For your head," he said. "My own recipe to cure hangovers."

"Does it taste as disgusting as it looks?" she asked, reluctantly taking the glass.

"Oh yes, but you'll be happier in the long run."

Hermione frowned at the drink before plugging her nose and chugging it down

quickly. She pulled a face as she finished and Bronson laughed as he took the empty glass back.

"How did you know I was hung-over?" she asked, while turning to watch him in the kitchen. He really was an artist in there.

"Malfoy told me," he said while chopping onions.

Hermione threw her hand over her mouth when she accidentally got a good whiff. And then her eyes drifted over to Draco's bedroom door. It was open.

"Where is he?" she asked, hoping there would be time to duck back into her room before he made an appearance. Anything to avoid suffering the humiliation of last night. Clearly, he had found her drunk and passed out on the balcony, probably just after his slag left.

Hermione's fists clenched as the pain she had felt last night suddenly returned to her. But she would not cry. Not in front of Bronson. Besides, there was no reason for it. She had already decided that any feelings she had for Draco were not reasonable, so she would just have to forget about them. That should be easy enough. She had successfully shut her feelings off for over four years. Become an expert at it even. This was the same. He was a Death Eater and all she had to do was emotionally detach herself. Done.

Just then, the front door opened and Draco walked in with his satchel on his hip. He kicked off his shoes before noticing her sitting there, his eyes immediately falling upon hers.

Hermione gulped. No. Not done.

She stood up quickly and headed for the washroom. "I need a shower," she mumbled to Bronson before slamming the door behind her.

Bronson stared after her peculiarly before moving his eyes to Draco. "Fighting again?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't fucking know. Probably."

When Hermione got out of the shower, Bronson was gone but whatever he had been cooking in the kitchen was still brewing. The curtains covering the door to the balcony were currently blowing, letting her know Draco was out there. She ducked into her room quickly and shut the door, pressing her back to it and sighing with her eyes closed.

"What's with the dramatics?"

Hermione jumped as her heart literally skipped a beat. Draco was standing over her dresser, pulling things out of his satchel and putting them into her small bag.

"What are you doing?" she asked, suddenly realizing that she was very naked underneath the robe he had given her. She pulled it tighter around her body.

"I bought you some potions and herbs for when you go. As well as a few other things that might come in handy."

"Kicking me out already?" she asked while crossing her arms.

Draco smirked. "You're the one who said you needed to be prepared."

With all of the potions now in her bag, Draco put it down on the ground and reached both hands into his own. He came out with several large books. And then he grabbed more. And more. Clearly, he had cast an Undetectable Extension Charm on it after her lesson.

Hermione's eyes widened in awe as the pile he was making grew larger and larger. Her mouth began to salivate. This was just like Christmas!

"I was able to get everything on your list, plus a few additions I thought might come in handy. I'll let you decide what goes in the bag and what you want to read now."

Draco put his satchel over his shoulder and walked towards the door. Hermione was still standing against it, her eyes focused excitedly on the books.

Reaching past her for the knob and brushing her hip in a way that could only have been intentional, Draco leaned down and whispered, "Excuse me, Granger."

The purr of his voice sent a chill through Hermione. Her body stiffened as he grasped firmly onto her arm, carefully moving her out of the way. He flashed her his signature crooked grin before opening the door just enough to slip out and shut it behind him.

Hermione stared at the closed door for a long time, unable to move her gaze anywhere else. She had absolutely no idea what was going on in Draco's head. He had more-or-less confessed his feelings for her last night and, now, he just seemed … off. What was he playing at? She would not be surprised if this was all some sick game of his.

Well, Hermione was not going to take this sitting down! She quickly changed into

some clothes and scanned the books until she came across one about the ideologies and implications of numerology in the study of Arithmancy. A little light reading.

She grabbed the book and the blanket she had found tangled in her bed sheets, wrapping it around her before going out to the living room and sitting down on the sofa. Hermione opened the book and immediately began reading.

Draco came over a short while later and handed her a cup of tea before going over and making a fire.

"There's supposed to be another thunderstorm tonight," he said nonchalantly as he used his wand to ignite the wood. "You might want to prepare early."

"Fine," she said without taking her eyes off of the book.

"How is your head processing that?"

She assumed he meant the complicated book she was attempting to read. While it actually was a bit of a challenge, and she often caught herself reading sentences two or three times, she simply said, "All is well."

Draco nodded. He walked away and returned a minute later with his own book and a cup of tea. He sat down on the other end of the sofa and put his feet up casually before opening to somewhere in the middle.

Using her peripherals, Hermione saw that it was a book on mastering Occlumency and Legilimency. She had to ask. "Don't you already know how to use both of those?"

Without looking up, Draco said, "I do, but I have only mastered Occlumency. Something we should both be thankful for."

She was. Just knowing Draco had the ability to block people from seeing her in his memories was a great burden lifted off her chest.

"Legilimency is more difficult for me. So, while I *can* do it, I would like to be better. Surely you, of all people, understand the need to better yourself."

Hermione blushed and nodded before returning to her own book. A gust of wind shot in through the open balcony door and she began to shiver. Draco raised his wand and closed it.

"Sorry. I was airing out that bloody onion smell."

"What was he making?" she asked, looking back at the still brewing pot.

"Just some dinner for us. A new recipe he wanted to try out."

"Oh," she said, looking at the pot and frowning. "What happened to my untouched dinner from last night?" She could not resist.

"I ate it," Draco said casually.

Hermione whipped her head towards him. "*All* of it?" she asked.

With a nod, he said, "I was very hungry, since I didn't eat anything all of yesterday."

"Why not?"

"Because I was anticipating your dinner. I know how much it meant to you, being your first time cooking it on your own and all -"

Hermione blushed. So, apparently, they were being blunt. She made a mental note.

"- and I would have been here if I hadn't run into complications."

"Complications," she repeated. "Is *that* what we're calling your slags now?" So much for being the bigger person. The way it stood now, Draco was definitely winning whatever game he had her playing. She was still trying to figure it out.

"Believe what you want, that girl had nothing to do with why I was late."

"Then why -?"

"I'm a Death Eater, Granger, and, sometimes, I need to keep up appearances," he said as he turned another page. "Theo and I have spent every Halloween together since we were five. When I tried to get out of it, suspicions arose. Neither you nor I can afford to have anyone doubt my intentions. So I went. And, when I tried to leave, some girl followed me. Rabastan forced me into his carriage with her, and then sent her up here while he proceeded to threaten the lives of my father and friends if I didn't find you, which everyone realizes I have not tried very hard to do. So that's it, the truth, which, I'm sure, is nothing compared to whatever you created in that head of yours."

Hermione's book dropped from her hands. "Rabastan threatened you?"

"He did. The older Death Eaters don't like me very much."

If at all possible, Hermione felt like an even bigger idiot than she already did. She should have known he wouldn't worry her for just any reason. "Draco, I'm … I'm sorry. I didn't realize -"

"Obviously," said Draco, finally shutting his book. "I'm going to have some of Bronson's soup he made. Do you want a bowl?"

Hermione looked down at her stomach just as it growled. She did not eat anything yesterday either and she was already feeling much better after Bronson's hangover cure. Food actually sounded like a good idea. "Yes, but I can get it," she said, standing up with him.

She followed him into the kitchen and took out bowls and spoons while he put a ladle into the pot.

"So I wanted to purchase you some daywear," said Draco while giving the contents in the pot a few stirs, "but I wasn't sure of your sizes."

Hermione held out the bowls while he poured. "I'm actually not sure of my sizes anymore either," she said. "I've lost weight since … since before." She looked down at her bony body and frowned.

After putting the lid back on the pot, Draco lifted her jumper a little and poked her stomach. "Looks like you've gotten plenty of it back."

Hermione's face sunk. *That* was definitely on the list of top ten things never to tell a woman, even one who had been starved for over four years. "Thanks … I think," she added under her breath.

Draco took one of the bowls from her. "I really have no idea when it comes to women's sizes so you're going to have to help me out a bit." He grabbed his book from the sofa, and took it and his food to the table.

Hermione did the same. So it seemed that whatever game this was, part of it entailed simply acting like yesterday never happened. And being blunt. She could do that.

Taking a seat, Hermione told him what her sizes once were, but mentioned that he should probably get a size smaller in the trousers.

"I'll get your old sizes," he said. "We should be optimistic about fattening you up. Bronson will be happy to assist."

Hermione crinkled her forehead. "Umm … all right." What was with him? So, apparently, another part of this game was being … rude? No. That wasn't it. Oblivious? It was closer, but still not right. Hermione got the feeling he knew exactly what he was doing.

As soon as they were finished, Draco took his bowl and hers, and quickly washed them. He then grabbed his book and said, "I think I'll finish this in my room. Night, Granger."

"Okay …" Hermione turned to look after him. "Night," she said right as he shut his door. All right. So he was not giving her the silent treatment, but he definitely was not acting like himself. It was like he was … "Disconnected," she whispered to herself. She had finally found the right word.

On the other side of the thin piece of wood, Draco smirked to himself before plopping onto his bed. His room was all back in order now since he had borrowed her wand that morning to put everything in place, sneaking a few more kisses from her drunk but willing lips. Of course, he assumed she would not remember. Those were more for him than her, anyway. But the rest of it … The light touches, the calm manner, the detached conversations … those were *all* for her.

Draco could only imagine the millions of conspiracy theories going on in her pretty little head right now. But if this was what it took to get Hermione to realize she wanted him then he was glad to do it. The way he was.

He gave it a week before she cracked, and that was being generous.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

"My lord, I simply do not understand why we are suffering the same treatment as everyone else in the city," complained Macnair as several of the Death Eaters sat around their usual table for meetings. "I think you underestimate how humiliating it is to be stuck riding the Knight Bus with commoners."

"I see," said Lord Voldemort, folding his hands calmly in front of him. "And just what is it you would like me to do so that you might not suffer this … 'humiliation'?"

"I don't know. A personal carriage service? Not all of us can afford to order one every night," said Macnair, glancing slyly at the Lestranges.

"Why not brooms?" suggested Theo, looking rather bored as he tapped his fingers on the table. One stern look from his father and he stopped.

Draco could not help but wonder if Theo would be so eager to please if he knew

his father had put him on a hit list.

"I do not believe the Dementors would like that, my lord," said Bellatrix, leaning in towards Voldemort. "They have a hard time differentiating between people, and someone could easily slip through their fingertips."

"We would end up having to increase our own patrol for that to work," said Draco, tapping his own fingers on the table for no reason other than to irritate Quincy Nott. "And we only have a few carriages in the city. We cannot deprive them from the citizens who actually have the means to pay for them."

"Who cares about them? We're the ones who bloody need to get around."

Draco smirked. He stopped tapping his fingers and leaned forward in his chair, casually folding his hands in front of him and pressing into them. "Let me put a few things into perspective for you, Macnair. If we force the carriage drivers to be our fucking chauffeurs, then they won't have time to go out and make any real money, which means they won't be able to obtain the resources they need to survive. Therefore, they go out of fucking business and we're right back where we started. It's called cause and effect."

The others all stared at him blankly.

Draco rolled his eyes. "*They work to live*," he drawled. His smile faded as he leaned back again. "Carriages are out."

Everyone was silent for a long moment.

"So why is the Floo out, now?" asked Theo, scratching at his head.

"Because we don't want the whole fucking city Flooing around," said Draco.

"But aren't there ways to arrange it so it only works in certain locations and for certain people?"

Everyone leaned in towards Theo.

"We can activate it in all of our homes, and register our names at the Ministry so only the group of us can use it legally. Then maybe setup some sort of object that has to be held for it to work successfully. It's complicated, but it's possible."

They all looked at Draco, who would, undoubtedly, find some sort of flaw in this plan. Only, this time, he had nothing. So they all turned their attention to Lord Voldemort.

"You may head to the Ministry now and arrange it, young Nott. Draco, go with him. And take Rodolphus and his carriage along with you. Ms. Parkinson?"

Pansy sat up at attention. This was, perhaps, the first time the Dark Lord had addressed her personally and she looked bloody nervous.

"You will wait here and prepare the fireplace in my drawing room, so that Draco might give it a try once everything is arranged. Everyone else may disperse."

"Wait!" shouted Rabastan before anyone could even get out of their seats. "I believe Malfoy owes us an update on his progress in finding Potter's Mudblood."

Draco groaned. He crossed his arms and stared Rabastan straight in the eye. "We sent owls out to every citizen, asking that they submit their work schedules. This way, we will know the best times to *invade* their homes. Parkinson," he motioned towards Pansy, "has already agreed to go through the responses and make schedules for us. I hope you're all prepared to work bloody overtime."

Now everyone else groaned.

Once that was done, they all disbanded, Draco and Theo following Rodolphus out to his carriage, leaving Rabastan to find his own way home.

Registering all of their names at the Ministry was easy enough. Obviously, they were given whatever the fuck they wanted there, with the Minister of Magic being Imperiused and all. But then they had to figure out some sort of trick to get the fireplaces to work.

Draco was hoping this would put a damper on their plans, since he really had no interest in giving other Death Eaters access to Floo into his home, but, unfortunately, Theo had another bright fucking idea.

He had the Ministry create magical stones that would let them Floo either from a registered location or to a registered location. No matter what, one of their homes would have to be involved.

"Fucking brilliant," Draco muttered to himself.

"So should we go to your place and test it out, mate?" asked Theo as they walked out of the Ministry, swinging his bag of stones.

"Fuck no," said Draco, his mind instantly flooding with the many disasters that could happen in that situation.

"But neither of us," he motioned to him and Rodolphus, "lives even remotely close to here. There's no way we're going all the way across the fucking city to test the Floo," said Theo.

"We already have to fucking set it up in everyone's homes anyway. What's the difference?" asked Draco.

"*Exactly*. What's the difference?" countered Theo.

Draco clenched his fists. He needed to stay composed. He needed to stay in control.

"We're *going* to your place," said Theo. "Honestly, I don't know when you became so bloody private."

Draco did not have to think very hard to realize it was probably around the time he took in a runaway slave who sliced a man's throat open. A man who was with them now, and who he had neglected to mention to Hermione was even still alive. Well … *this* could not end well.

*Fuck*.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Hermione sat on the balcony, wrapped in her blanket while she mindlessly flipped the pages in the book she was not actually reading. She had tried listening to Potterwatch in the living room earlier, but even the familiar voices of George Weasley and Angelina Johnson were not enough to hold her attention.

She could not stop thinking about Draco. For days now, he had been playing what she knew was a game. He had been cold and distant, but still always right there. Speaking was not the issue, he would answer anything she asked. Bluntly. But there was no passion behind it, no drive, no bloody personality.

Draco was trying to get her to crack. She knew he was. He wanted her to admit whatever it was going on between them … that it was *not* nothing. And Hermione knew he was right, because what she felt … it was definitely something. But how could she admit that to him when she still had not figured out what this 'something' was yet?

Hermione had never been so confused in all of her life. She knew she cared for Draco, that was not the question, but how much did she care? After everything that had happened to her, she hardly trusted her feelings. He had done so much

for her, it would not be so farfetched that her gratitude could be misconstrued for something else. Hadn't Bronson said something along those lines to her?

But gratitude … that did not explain the safe and warm feeling she got that night he held her during the thunderstorm, or how beautiful his heartbeat felt under her hand when they had kissed, a memory that was never far from her mind.

Hermione tried to distract herself with memories of Ron instead, but it was hard when he had never ignited the same fire in her she was currently feeling. She had been so young back then, so innocent. The most she had ever thought about was kissing him on the sofa in the Gryffindor common room, something that had seemed incredibly ill-behaved and dangerous to her at the time.

But Draco … when she thought about him, her mind strayed to more than just visions of them kissing on a sofa. She wanted all of him. To touch him, to feel him, for him to feel her. She wanted possess every part of him, not just his lips.

Did that make her sick? Hermione had just escaped the Death Eaters, and now she suddenly found herself desiring one. Draco knew the people who had taken advantage of her. He knew them well and saw them every day, but, still, she wanted him. To feel what it was like to have him not just on her, but inside of her.

Hermione whimpered at the realization of her dirty thoughts. After everything that had happened to her, how could she want this? With *him*?

She wished he was here now. So she could smell him, touch him, hold him. Everything she craved and more. Merlin, he smelled good. It was intoxicating. Every time she breathed him in, she could not get enough.

Hermione bit her bottom lip.

*Damn.*

He was winning. She knew he was playing a game and, still, she was letting him win.

Hermione slammed her book shut. There was no point in even pretending anymore. She needed to talk to him. She needed to explain these … these feelings. How long until he got home?

Just then, the front door burst open and Draco ran inside. He did not even bother taking off his shoes - a great taboo for him - as he hurried into the center of the flat, making sure there were no visible signs of Hermione here. Her door was shut,

he quickly tossed her radio under the sofa. Everything looked clear. But then Draco looked at the balcony door and, through a small crack in the curtains, he could see a pair of amber eyes staring back at him. Draco's breath hitched as his heart slowed immensely.

Hermione began to move like she was going to come inside but Draco held his hand out to stop her. She froze. He lowered his hand only a second before Theo came panting through the door.

"Five … fucking … floors …" He swallowed. "How … the fuck … you do this every day?"

"I'm not a fucking fat-ass," stated Draco.

Theo looked down at his fairly small build and frowned. "Hmm. I suppose it couldn't hurt to exercise at least once in my life. What is your routine?"

Rodolphus walked through the door then. He had come up the stairs at a more leisurely pace and was breathing just fine. His eyes began scanning the flat instantly, investigating it. He walked into the center of the room and took in everything, his eyes stopping on something on the coffee table. A book. *Hogwarts: A History*. He picked it up and raised his eyebrows at Draco.

"What?" Draco shrugged. "School pride, you know?"

Theo walked towards them and took the book from Rodolphus. He laughed. "Ah, man, this book reminds me of Granger."

Rodolphus tensed.

"She always had her bloody nose in it in school."

Why did everyone keep remembering that?

Rodolphus tore the book back out of Theo's hands and stared at it for a long moment before tossing it across the room. He turned towards the fireplace, completely oblivious to the amber eyes watching him through the glass door.

Hermione tried to control her breathing as she stared at this ghost in front of her. Only it was not a ghost. Rodolphus looked completely solid, a visible white scar marking his once unblemished neck. Her whole body began to shake.

He left her line of sight, but Theo walked further into it to pick up the book Rodolphus had thrown. He stared at the cover for a moment, checking for damage

before glancing in her direction. She quickly pressed her back against the wall so he could not see her.

"*Shit,*" she whispered to herself.

Inside, Rodolphus was preparing the fireplace. While he did that, Draco went over and stood in front of the crack in the curtains. He put his hand behind his back and motioned for her to get over to the other side. He had to listen closely but there was definitely movement out there.

A few minutes later, Rodolphus put his wand to his throat and said, "It's done. Care to give it a try?"

He and Theo looked at Draco expectantly. He glanced between them. "Me?" he asked.

They both nodded.

"That's quite all right. Age before beauty," he said, motioning to Rodolphus.

"It's your flat," said Rodolphus, "and the Dark Lord put you in charge of this. So get to it."

Draco looked at Theo in hopes of sending him instead, but he had already made himself comfortable on the sofa and was browsing through *Hogwarts: A History*.

"So, Roddy, what is it about this book that you think had your little Mudblood poppet so intrigued?" Theo looked up at Rodolphus and smirked. "I mean, you knew her so well, right? Inside *and* out? Well, before she slashed your throat open, that is."

Rodolphus was about to charge at Theo when Draco held his hand out to stop him. "Not in my flat, you don't." Draco's insides shuddered. There was no getting out of this. He needed to get it over with. "Theo, give me a fucking stone."

Theo took one out of his pocket and tossed it to him.

"The two of you need to stay out of fucking trouble while I'm gone. Theo, don't provoke him."

"Yeah, yeah." Theo waved his hand nonchalantly before returning to the book.

"I mean it, Theo. And stay the fuck out of my shit."

"Got it!" Theo held up the A-OK symbol without removing his eyes from the page.

Draco breathed heavily before going over to the fireplace. His pot of Floo powder was still next to it, so he took a handful and tossed it into the fire Rodolphus had started. When the flames turned green, he stepped inside and said, "Minister of Magic's Residence."

Draco was then sucked away, given that strange tugging yet weightless sensation he had not felt in almost two months. He landed gracefully in the Dark Lord's fireplace. Pansy was sitting in a chair nearby, waiting for him.

"So it worked then?" she asked, getting to her feet.

"Looks like it," he said, already turning to head back.

"Draco, wait!"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Not fucking now, Parkinson."

"Then when? You have purposely made yourself unavailable to me for weeks now."

"Yeah. So?"

"I just … I want to know why?"

Because she was a fucking bitch for ever having laid a hand on Hermione. "No reason, Parkinson. But, like I said before, it's nothing personal." Only, this time, it was.

He heard Pansy whimper behind him. "Is this because of what I heard Mr. Greengrass speaking with the Dark Lord about?"

Draco turned and pursed his eyebrows. "What?"

"You know. About you and Astoria. When she becomes a Death Eater."

"What?" he repeated.

"You *know*. The … the marriage they're trying to arrange."

Draco's eyes widened as he whole body drained of blood. "*What*?" he repeated for a third time. "When the fuck did you hear that?"

"Just now," she said, motioning towards the dining room they always held their

meetings in. "You … you didn't know?"

"I'm not fucking marrying anyone!" Draco had never had much interest in marriage, and the current dark world they lived in only exacerbated those feelings. And since when did the Dark Lord care about bloody marriage?

"Oh. So it's just me then." Pansy looked sadly to the ground.

"Damn right it is!" Draco stepped back into the fireplace. "Want to get back in my good graces, Parkinson? Find out more about this … 'arrangement'."

Pansy looked up at him and nodded.

Mind now clouded, Draco Flooed back to his flat. Only, when he got there, Theo and Rodolphus were nowhere to be seen. The book was back on the table and … and the door to the patio was open.

"Shit."

Draco stuck his hand into his pocket and gripped firmly onto his wand as he headed for the door, ready to strike if necessary. When he got outside, he was surprised to find Theo leaning over the edge of the balcony while Rodolphus sat in Draco's usual chair. They were both smoking cigarettes. Hermione was not here.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Hey, mate," said Theo, glancing over his shoulder at him. "Better not let the Dark Lord know you have these. Is this why you have *Incendio* on your wand, like, ten times every morning?"

Draco looked at Rodolphus. "Can you even fucking smoke that with your throat?" he asked.

Rodolphus shrugged.

"What would your brother say if he saw you with that?"

Rodolphus chuckled and put his wand to his throat. "He'd probably be more interested to know that *you* were smoking them."

"You going to tell on me, then?" asked Draco, going to the edge of the balcony with Theo and glancing over the side. Well, Hermione wasn't dangling, so where was she? He walked further down the balcony, only to accidentally kick something when he got near the end. Something invisible. His heart stopped. Shit. He had to

get rid of them. *Now*.

"I don't see any reason to mention this. As long as you do what I've asked."

Theo glanced sideways at him, obviously curious about what they were talking about.

"I said we'd fucking go out looking for her and we are. What more do you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to find her," said Rodolphus, standing up and tossing his cigarette over the side of the balcony.

Draco could not help but notice the way Theo grimaced at the mention of Hermione. When he saw Draco staring at him, he quickly pulled it back.

"Guess we better get on to the next place." Rodolphus headed inside.

Theo took one last drag of his cigarette before putting it out and following after him. Draco rubbed what he recognized as Hermione's head. She leaned into him for a moment, a slight whimper escaping her lips before he had to follow the others.

"You two are fully capable of doing this without me," said Draco, walking over to meet them at the door. "If there are any complications figure it the fuck out for yourself, because I'm done for the night."

"Whatever," said Theo, heading out first. "Come along, Roddy! Time to leave the hermit to his cave."

Rodolphus gave Draco a curious look before following Theo. The moment he was out the door, Draco shut it. He stood there for a second, trying to catch the breath he had been holding since the moment they got there. When he turned around, Hermione was standing in the doorway to the balcony, nothing but a floating head as she still clutched the blanket around her.

"A Disillusionment Charm. Quick thinking," he said with a gulp.

Hermione tossed the blanket and a book she had been holding onto the sofa before going over to the fireplace. She took out her wand and immediately starting casting some sort of spell on it.

"What are you doing?" he asked, walking towards her.

"Setting up some sort of alarm to trigger whenever anyone Floos here," she said without even a glance in his direction.

"Look, Granger, perhaps I should explain about -"

"Let me finish first."

Draco remained silent while Hermione cast her spell. Once it was done, she put her wand away and stared at the blazing fire blankly for a moment. Then, without warning, she turned to Draco and slapped him hard across the face. He stumbled but still managed to stay on his feet.

"How dare you! How dare you, Draco Malfoy! How could you not tell me that he was alive?"

"I … I didn't want to worry you," he said while rubbing his aching face.

"But I'm already worried! Every single day I'm worried! And Rodolphus … *He's* the one who wants you to find me?"

"Both he and Rabastan," Draco answered honestly.

"What does he want with me?" she screamed, tears already visible in her eyes.

"What do you think?" he said. "He wants to possess you."

Hermione whimpered, but quickly covered her mouth. "It will be worse. He will be so much worse to me after what I did to him." She turned and began pacing back and forth. "I … I can't go back to him! I won't! I'd rather die! I -"

"Calm down, Granger!" shouted Draco, grabbing her shoulders and holding her still. "I'm not going to let him get close enough to lay a hand on you! You understand?"

"But -"

"No buts. Rodolphus will *never* have you again. I promise you. I … I won't let him, even if it means killing him in a room full of Death Eaters. You will *never* be his."

Hermione sobbed but still nodded. She wiped at her eyes, but it was pretty much pointless since the tears kept flowing. Draco pulled her close and held her tightly. Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist and let herself melt into him, that wonderful scent of his filling her nostrils.

And then he let her go far too quickly, without even so much as a kiss on the top of her head, which she had become quite accustomed to.

"What do you want for dinner?" he asked, back to that cold, detached manner he had been displaying for days now.

"I'm … I'm not hungry," she said following after him. "Draco …"

He turned and looked at her.

"Draco, please stop playing games with me."

He said nothing.

"I … I know what you're trying to do and I won't let you manipulate me."

He cocked an eyebrow before flashing that crooked grin of his. He had called it. Less than a week.

"Fine!" she shouted suddenly, obviously not appreciating the silent treatment. "You win, all right? I cave! I don't like you like this! I want you to be like how you were before! I want … I want *us* to be like how we were before."

Continuing with his deafening silence, Draco crossed his arms and waited for her to go on.

"I was wrong, all right?" she said, a new set of tears visible in her eyes. "We're not nothing. *This*," she motioned between them, "isn't nothing."

Draco pursed his lips. They were on the right track but … "So what is it then?"

Hermione blushed and looked to the floor. "I … I don't know. A friendship, I suppose."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Is that it?"

She sighed while looking up at him sadly. "I don't know what you want from me."

He bit his cheek and looked off to the side. It was a good, long while before he looked back at her and said, "I want more, Granger. *This*," he motioned between them, "whatever the fuck we've been doing for the past few weeks, isn't enough."

With a heavy sigh, Draco walked to the door and went into the closet for his cloak. One step forward, two steps back. Fucking Granger … Why wouldn't she just

admit it already?

"Draco …" she called, following him over. "Draco, please don't go."

"Why?" he asked.

She didn't have an answer.

Rolling his eyes, Draco said, "I need some fucking air."

"Please … please stay," she pleaded. "I'm sorry I don't feel the same way but -"

Draco whipped towards her. "You see, that's the thing, Granger. You *do* feel the same way. I know you do but, for some reason, you keep fucking denying it, even to yourself."

Hermione choked as she tried to hold in another whimper. She hated this. Why couldn't she just be honest with him? Tell him everything that was holding her back. Tell him about his father …

"Look, I understand you've been through something traumatic. I know it doesn't always seem like it, but I do. But you're never going to get past all of this shit if you keep fucking lying to yourself. Don't let those bastards win by denying your feelings for someone who actually cares."

"Are … are you saying you -?"

"Care?" he finished, his face igniting for the first time in days. "Of course I fucking care! We wouldn't even be having this conversation if I didn't! I care so much that it fucking makes me sick at night! I'm not …" He gulped. "I'm not used to this, Granger, any more than you are. I've trained myself not to care and, for years, it's worked just bloody fine. Then you come back into my life and, all of a sudden, I don't know what I'm fucking doing! I'm not even concerned for my own fucking life anymore! Just yours."

Hermione found herself slowly moving towards Draco. She just wanted to touch him, to hold him, to breathe him in. But, before she could get there, he turned away.

"I'm going out. When I get back, don't talk to me unless you've figured your-fucking-self out. I don't associate with bloody liars."

And with that, Draco opened the door and slammed it behind him, leaving Hermione alone once again, with nothing but her tears to keep her company.

It was several hours later before Draco returned. Hermione, who had been lying on her bed, hurried off of it but stopped when her hand reached the knob. What if he was not alone? She clutched her aching heart at the realization that Draco coming home with another random slag tonight was not so farfetched.

And then there were voices.

The tears were caught in Hermione's eyes as her greatest fear suddenly became a reality. Someone was here with him.

Without even thinking, Hermione left her room and followed the sound of the voices to Draco's bedroom door. She put her ear up to it and listened. A horrible pang shot through her heart as the girl giggled. The tears in her eyes finally fell as she brought her hand up and placed it flat on the cold wood, just trying to feel some part of him in there. She had let this happen. She had pushed him away and into some other witch's -

Hermione was suddenly hit with a great shock when the door burst open and she stumbled forward into his room. She instinctually took out her wand and held it firmly in front of her, ready to cast '*Obliviate*' on whoever was here with him.

"Evening, Granger."

Draco was directly in front of her, watching her with an amused grin. She lowered her wand and looked all around. He was alone in here. But then what was …

Her eyes then landed on the small radio sitting on top of his chest of drawers. *Her* radio. Aimed at the wall separating their rooms. It was Friday night, meaning he knew a female voice would be there. Ginny's.

Draco turned the radio off and leaned against the dresser, his grin only widening.

Hermione's face immediately fell into a grimace as she realized what was going on here. "You … you bloody cockroach! I said no more games, Draco! How dare you trick -"

She did not get the chance to finish her sentence before Draco had her in his arms and slammed up against the wall.

"I knew you were a liar," he said, his grin never faltering.

And then his lips were crashing into hers. Hermione remained completely still as

Draco began to kiss her, unsure of how she was supposed to react in that moment. She was angry. Definitely angry. But …

"Admit it," he whispered into her ear before running his tongue along it. "Admit that you want this just as much as I do."

"I -"

"*Admit it*." Draco pulled back and looked at her hungrily. He held his hands against the wall on either side of her, pinning her there as he continued to watch her with lust-filled eyes.

"No, I -"

The moment she began to protest, his lips were back on hers. Massaging, licking, biting, sucking, doing everything he could to drive her absolutely mad. And it was working.

Hermione tried to resist, but a few more moments of this and she knew she could not. Her eyes closed as she slowly began to clutch her arms around his waist, pulling him harder into her. Who was she trying to fool? She could not fight this. It was too strong, too powerful, too …

"Fucking beautiful," he said, finishing her thought as she finally began to respond. "Tell me, Granger. I need to hear the words."

"I -" Hermione gasped as he pressed his firmness into her. "I want this!" she blurted out to her own surprise. "I've wanted this. Since … since the night you first stayed with me." And that was the truth, something she had not realized until that moment. She had felt safe with him that night, and that security had changed everything. Her feelings were no exception.

Draco pulled back, grinning widely as he tucked a stray curl behind her ear. Victory had never tasted so sweet. "Well, then, that's all you had to say."

He went in for her lips again and Hermione took this moment to completely take him in. His scent, his touch, the way he felt beneath her fingertips. She needed more.

"I'm still mad at you," she said between parts of their lips.

"It wouldn't be right if you weren't."

She loved the way she could feel his smile pressed against her.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, Draco picked Hermione up and carried her over to his bed. He threw her into the center of it before climbing on top of her, determined to keep any loss of contact as minimal as possible, so she would never get a chance to be overcome with doubt.

Hermione's hands began clutching the sides of his jumper and Draco instantly knew what she wanted. He pulled back for just a moment to pull it off of him. After discarding it to the side, he quickly grabbed something out of the drawer in his nightstand. Hermione watched closely as he pulled a black piece of cloth over his Dark Mark.

"What's that?" she asked.

"An armband. So that we don't have a repeat performance of last time."

Before Hermione had a chance to ask more questions, Draco caught her head between his palms and leaned down, kissing her tenderly as she began to run her hands along his chest, once again stopping just above his heart.

Draco trailed his fingers down her face, her neck, her arms, not stopping until he reached the bottom of her jumper. He began to pull it up, but her hands were quickly off of his chest and she was yanking it back down.

He pulled back and stared down at her wide, frightened eyes.

"I'm not afraid of your scars, Granger."

"I … I know. But I -"

Reaching over to his nightstand again, Draco grabbed his wand and used it to turn out the lights. "Better?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. Her hands slowly began to give as his returned to pull the jumper off of her. Even in the dark, Draco could still see the beauty in the body he finally had the chance to caress. While he was appreciative, in this moment, that he had never thought to buy her a bra, it suddenly dawned on him that he should probably do that. Mental note for later.

Running his hands up her flat stomach and towards her breasts, he paused for a moment before gripping them for the first time. Draco looked down at her. She was biting her lip as he caressed her delicately. He leaned back down and pressed his lips to hers, kissing her softly as he finally took it all in. He was finally getting what he wanted. He was finally getting *her*. And it was as beautiful as he imagined it.

Draco moved his hands up so they were resting on either side of her head, running them through Hermione's hair while hers wrapped around his back. His bare chest rubbed against hers, and the sensation of skin against skin caused him to moan into her mouth.

He needed more.

Draco wanted all of her tonight but, as an aspiring realist, he was fully aware that this might not happen right away. Which was why he was so surprised when her hands moved between them and she started undoing his trousers.

He pulled away quickly and looked down at her. She sucked in her bottom lip again and gazed back at him.

"I should warn you now, Granger. Don't do that if you won't be able to follow through."

Hermione took a deep breath beneath him, causing her chest to press up against his. Merlin, he wanted to taste those breasts. But not yet. Not without the -

"Okay," she said suddenly, her voice cracking as she looked up at him nervously. "I … I'm going to follow through, Draco. I told you, I want this."

"But … we don't have to so quickly -"

"I *want* this, Draco," Hermione repeated sternly. She reached up and stroked her fingers along his cheek. "I promise."

The little resolve Draco had melted underneath her touch. He nodded slowly before bringing his own hand to her face, moving her hair out of her eyes. "All right."

Draco wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist and pulled her tightly against him. He began to kiss her more aggressively. She trembled beneath him as she nervously brought her hands back to his trousers. He helped her pull them off of him before doing the same to her, leaving them both completely naked.

Running one hand along her side, Draco began kissing down Hermione's neck, distracting her while his other hand moved between them, making sure she was as prepared for this as she claimed to be. If the wetness between her thighs was any indication, she was more than ready for him.

He massaged her a little longer, relishing in the soft moans escaping her lips as he slipped a finger inside of her, and then a second. When she gasped, he moved his

mouth down to her breast, sucking on the perky pink nipple that tasted as sweet as the rest of her.

Hermione closed her eyes as Draco continued to touch her, her hands clinging onto his shoulders awkwardly as she realized she had no idea what she was doing. This was the first time anyone had ever tried to make *her* feel good, instead of just using her body to bring their own release, normally quickly and without any sort of priming.

Suddenly, her mind was flooded with memories of these men. Using her, pounding her, hurting her. Never once caring when they were so rough they made her bleed.

"Granger."

Hermione opened her eyes again to see Draco staring at her, the obvious signs of worry visible in his eyes. She had not even realized he had stopped. And then she felt it. The dampness stinging her cheeks. He brought his hand up and used his thumb to wipe them.

"Look, Granger, we don't have to -"

"No!" Hermione shook her head urgently. She grabbed his arms and said, "Draco, please! I want this. I … I do. It's just …" She closed her eyes again, letting more tears release. "I can't shake the memories."

A pause.

"Granger, open your eyes."

Hermione did as he instructed. She looked up at him as he continued to stroke her damp cheek.

"If we do this, I'm going to need you to keep your eyes open at all times."

She nodded.

"Never take them off of me, not even once. You understand?"

She nodded again.

"That way, if you ever start to feel that fear, you will know that it's me here with you." Draco leaned down and kissed her chastely, not once taking his eyes off of her. "You ready?"

"Can … can you hold my hand?" she asked with a slight blush to her cheeks.

Draco smiled. He grabbed her hand off of his shoulder and interlaced her fingers with his, resting them on the pillow just beside her head.

Hermione could feel as Draco moved his other hand downward, using it to stroke himself a few times before settling between her legs. She continued to gaze at him with wide eyes, refusing to break eye contact as he slowly began to enter her.

Hermione winced as he pushed all the way in, her hand squeezing tightly onto his as their eyes remained locked on each other. Draco brought his hand back up and cupped her face before kissing her again.

"I'm going to move now," he breathed into her ear.

Hermione nodded, holding onto his back with her other hand as he began to slowly thrust inside of her. She sucked in her lips, trying to hold back any signs of pleasure as he began to pant above her. Realizing what she was doing, Draco touched her lips, forcing them to part slightly and letting a small moan escape them.

After a few minutes of this slow movement, Draco told her he was going to move faster. His free hand clutched her hip as he steadily began to increase his rhythm.

"Granger … tell me you're all right," he demanded as his thrusts began to grow more frantic.

"I'm …" Her head fell back as he hit a particularly pleasant spot. She moaned and brought her eyes quickly back to his. "I'm all right."

Draco kissed her again, biting hard onto her bottom lip as he finally let himself sink into her. In all of his fantasies, sex with Hermione had always been good, but nothing he imagined could have prepared him for this. Every small sound that escaped her lips had him growing harder in what was already an incredibly tight and beautiful fit. He had never felt this unbelievable grasping on his cock before. It was perfect.

Even though they had barely begun something that would, undoubtedly, lead to many incredible nights together, Draco already could not get enough. He could shag her until morning if she let him, but he knew he could not keep this going too long. Her eyes still looked so wide and terrified, and he would need to ease her into all of this before he could have her in each and every way he wanted.

Before long, Hermione was moaning beneath him loudly and freely. Draco moved

his hand so it was between them, massaging with expert fingers to bring her to her climax that much quicker. To end the fear by giving her something beautiful. She began to suck in her lips again, so he kissed them to free her small sounds of pleasure from their prison.

Hermione's body began to writhe beneath his, and it was becoming harder and harder for her to stay focused on his eyes. But, still, she did, never breaking their gaze once as she moved closer. So, so much closer.

"Draco … Draco, say my name," she said between heavy pants. "I … I need to hear my name."

Clutching her hand even tighter, Draco hovered his lips above hers and slowly breathed, "Hermione."

This was the last piece she needed. After hearing her name, Hermione immediately came undone, her tight muscles clenching around him as her back arched and her body lost all control.

Draco took this moment to wrap his free arm underneath her, pulling her as close to him as he could get, wanting to feel every bit of her orgasm vibrate against him as it took hold. The look in her eyes as she came around him was all Draco needed to find his own release. One, two, three more thrusts and he was done, coming inside of her as she fell heavy in his arms, screaming her name once more, not just for her, but for himself, as well. Reminding him that he finally had what he wanted right there beneath him.

The two of them lay there for a moment, catching their breath as they continued to kiss every inch of skin they could find. Their hands remained clasped and Draco looked up at them before attempting to move off of her. But, before he could, she wrapped her arm tighter around his back and held him in place.

"No. Not yet. Let me just … feel you for a little bit longer."

Draco smirked. "Leave me inside of you for much longer, Granger, and I'm going to have to demand a repeat performance."

Hermione said nothing as she continued to hold him there.

"You all right?" he asked, unable to see her eyes from his heads current position in the crook of her neck. He felt her bushy-haired head nod against him.

"I just … like to feel you breathing."

"Dare I ask why?"

"I don't know. It makes me feel alive, I guess." She took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet aroma of his hair before saying, "Okay," and letting him go.

Draco pulled out of her before rolling off to the side, their entwined hands finally coming undone. He landed flat on his back, grabbed her waist and pulled her into him.

Hermione nervously put her head on his chest while he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her close. She slowly moved her hand onto his stomach, resting it there while the feeling of his breath steadily moving it up and down soothed her. Only the faint sound of her name was able to break her from her daze. Hermione looked up at him.

"Everything all right?"

She fixed her eyes on his lips and gave a shallow nod.

"Care to tell me what's on your mind, then?"

Hermione stared dazedly for a long moment before glancing back at his eyes and sighing. "If I tell you something, will you promise not react?"

Draco stiffened.

"I mean no being weird, no being angry. Just … just act like it's nothing."

Hermione's hand began to shake on his stomach. In hindsight, she should have known who she was talking to, but she wanted to get this out and Draco was the one she wanted to tell. So, when he clasped his hand with hers on his stomach and nodded, she took several deep breaths to prepare herself. She was not going to tell him everything, but she needed to tell him this one small piece.

"When … when I was first taken during the war and made a slave, I …" She gulped, looked away and sucked back her tears … "I was a virgin."

Hermione could feel Draco's hand tense on her shoulder.

"This was my first time by choice."

Draco knew he should not have been surprised. Hermione had always seemed frigid in school, and, if he had heard she was waiting for marriage or something, it would not have seemed so farfetched.

But actually hearing the words come out of her mouth was different. She had been a virgin that day when his father dragged her away, and he could not imagine it had lasted much longer. His hand clenched tighter onto her shoulder as he tried to keep his promise about not reacting, but that was really hard to do when he was, all of a sudden, overcome with this incredible urge to kill someone.

"Who?" he choked out.

Hermione glanced up at him. "What do you mean?"

"Who was the first to touch you, Granger?" he asked through gritted teeth, still trying to maintain his composure.

She glanced back down at their clasped hands and used her thumb to stroke the top of his. "It doesn't matter."

"It most certainly does -"

"There were so many that first time, Draco. I just … I shut myself off from it, just enough so all of their faces became a blur. I … I didn't want to know."

Draco tightened his grip on her and pulled her up so her head was level with his. He turned slightly so his body was pressed against her side and began brushing his fingers through her hair. Hermione brought her hand back up and touched his heart again.

"Would …" She took a deep breath, gulped, and started again. "Would it be all right if I … if I pretended that this was my first time? With you?"

Draco nodded as he continued to gaze down at her, leaning in and giving her a soft kiss in hopes of stopping the tears that were stinging behind his eyes from falling. He wanted names, but he knew he was not going to get them. Not tonight. And probably not from her. He would need to dig a little deeper for that.

"Is that why you needed this, Granger? To … to have your first time of your own freewill?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, but I … I wanted it to be with you. Don't think for one second that I didn't."

Bringing his lips back to hers, Draco kissed her sweetly. Her body was still tense as he leaned on her, but slowly began to ease as she let herself sink into him. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach as he continued to soothingly stroke her hair. His lips were so incredibly delicate in comparison to the rest of him, it seemed

almost unnatural.

When Draco pulled away, he planted chaste kisses on her cheeks and forehead before looking back down at her. Merlin, she looked beautiful like this. Her hair spread out in thick waves across the pillow, her amber eyes dancing in the small crack of moonlight shining through the curtains, and her pink, plump lips, always ready for him. His cock twitched and he knew he had to have her again.

"Do I have to go back to my room now?" she asked, continuing to gaze back at him as she played with a strand of his hair.

"No," he said, kissing her again. "Why would you think that?"

"Well, you don't normally let your … your *women* stay in your bed." Her cheeks turned rosy. "If I stay, you're not going to make me sleep on the floor, are you?" There was a faint upturn to her lips.

Draco smirked. "No, Granger. Only slags have to sleep on the floor, and you're no slag."

Her smile deepened.

Wanting to taste that smile, Draco kissed her again, this time with much more oomph behind it. He ran his hands down her sides, caressing her with well-trained fingers. She began to moan as he hardened against her.

"Shall we give it another go?" he whispered, grinning triumphantly as she smiled and nodded. Well, her stay here just got a lot more interesting.

**A/N: And let the lemons begin! Haha!**

**I sure know how to kill a mood … ;-)**

# Chapter 11: Because

Hermione gazed at Draco as he panted above her, his heavily-lidded eyes filled with a hungry lust while the feeling of his thrusting made her burn from the inside out. He had one hand on the inside of her knee, holding her leg upward so she was more open to him, the other one keeping a death grip on her hip.

The two of them had been shagging every night and most mornings for over a week now, and Hermione finally felt like she was getting the hang of it.

"Oh, fuck! Hermione!" he shouted as she grazed her teeth across his neck. Her nails were digging sharply into his back, which he had quickly learned meant that she wanted him to thrust harder. So he did.

Most days when Draco was gone and Hermione was left alone to really contemplate what it was they were doing, she could not help but realize the insanity of it all. This was Draco Malfoy. Someone who had been her enemy for years, and she had willingly given him something no one else had ever had. Her consent.

Hermione hated herself for letting this happen. She hated herself before they ever did anything. She hated herself after. But during … well, that was something different entirely. From the moment Draco would start sucking on her neck, letting her know exactly what it was he wanted, any hate she felt melted away and become pure, raw lust. Never in her life had she felt so incredibly alive than when he was inside of her, making her feel in ways she never thought possible. No, she definitely did not hate that.

Just then, Draco grabbed her around the waist and flipped them so she was on top. He must have been close because he knew she always liked to finish like this. So she was the one in control. In the beginning, he had helped her move her hips but now she never let him, wanting to bring them both to that final finish on her own.

Hermione put her hands on his chest and began bouncing fervently. He reached up and gripped his hand tightly in her hair, pulling her head down into a

passionate kiss. He loved to feel the sounds she made while coming against his lips.

The two of them had created such a perfect sync together that they always came within seconds of each other. Hermione was first tonight, the vibrations of the moans she was finally learning to let loose pushing him over that final edge.

And then it was over, Hermione's body becoming limp on top of his while he wrapped his arms around her, both breathing heavily as the hatred they had for themselves returned once more. No matter what, they both knew this could never end well. Someday soon, Hermione would leave and they would become enemies once more.

But, still, they kept at it. Because they had found something in each other that no one else could ever give them. Someone who understood. Even though they fought on opposite ends, they still knew what the other had been through, what they were going through now. And Hermione realized that this was something Harry and Ron would never be able to comprehend.

The closer she grew to Draco, the more she dreaded going back to her old friends. She was afraid to lose that comfort. What if she never found it again?

"Granger?"

Hermione looked down to see Draco watching her. He reached up and gently wiped her cheek. More tears. She hadn't even realized.

"Sorry," she said, her eyes suddenly moving to the armband he wore. She stroked it while putting her head on his chest to listen to his heartbeat. To hold onto that feeling of being alive for just a little bit longer. She smiled as she felt Draco kiss the top of her head.

"Want to come out to the balcony with me?"

Hermione nodded, taking one last moment to feel his breathing against her before slowly climbing off of him. She located her clothes and quickly put them on before slipping into the cozy robe he had given her. The moment she finished tying it around her waist, Draco was wrapping his arms around her, giving her a soft kiss before taking her hand and leading her outside.

When they got to the balcony, Hermione took her usual spot on the ground while Draco sat in his chair, casting a quick Silencing Charm. He took out a cigarette and lit it, not blind to the way Hermione crinkled her nose. She never said

anything, but he knew she hated it when he smoked, especially now that they were involved physically. Afterwards, she would always refuse to kiss him until he very thoroughly washed his mouth out.

Hermione began chewing on her bottom lip as she stared down at the street through the crack in the balcony. There was no movement down there, so he could not imagine what she was watching so intently. Probably being sucked into her own mind again, overanalyzing everything they were doing, as she so often did.

"Something on your mind, Granger?"

She blinked back to reality. "No."

Draco continued to watch her as he took another drag of his cigarette. "You already know I can tell when you're lying."

"It's nothing new, Draco. Just the same things I always think about after."

Draco frowned. "You *do* realize you've never told me what that is?"

"Yes."

"It just seems a bit backwards, doesn't it? That you'll let me stick my cock in you but you won't tell me what you're bloody thinking," he said, leaning forward on his knees.

"Please don't say it like that," she said, clenching her eyes shut. "I just … I don't like feeling dirty about it."

Draco smirked. "No reason to feel dirty. It's all just a beautiful, natural -"

"Not for me!" she interrupted, her cheeks becoming flushed.

Glancing sideways at her, Draco said, "I wish you'd stop doing that."

"Doing what?" she asked, staring back out at the street through the crack.

"Blaming yourself for something that was out of your control. I mean, if you truly see what you and I are doing in the same way -"

Hermione whipped her head back towards him and shouted, "No! That's … that's not what I meant!"

"Then how *do* you see what we're doing, Granger?"

She looked shyly to the ground. "I don't know."

"Does it feel wrong?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "But … but not right either, you know? I can't really explain it."

Draco gazed over at her and sighed. He put out his cigarette and waved his wand to clean his mouth, skin and clothes of its remains. Then he held out his arms. "Come here, Granger."

Hermione did a quick spell to make the balcony appear empty to any observers before getting up and walking over to Draco. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her onto his lap.

"This isn't easy for me either. Wanting you," he said while nuzzling into her neck. "Knowing no good will ever come from this. But I can't stop myself."

"Why do you want me, Draco?" she asked while tracing swirly patterns along his hand.

"There is no logic behind it. I simply do."

"But … but you can have anyone. As a Death Eater, pretty much all you have to do is point at a witch and she's yours."

Draco lifted his hand and pointed at Hermione.

She blushed and hit it back down. "You *know* what I mean."

"I don't know," he said with a smile. "I guess I'm just sick of my slags. Not one of them has ever left me completely satisfied."

"And I do?" asked Hermione, looking at him curiously.

"Completely? No," he answered honestly. "But it's pretty damn close."

"Oh." She bit her bottom lip.

Draco tightened his hold on her and smirked. "That wasn't an insult, but I've been keeping myself pretty tame for you. I look forward to the day you're ready for me to let loose."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Do I even want to know?"

"You'll see," was all he said before planting a gentle kiss on her neck.

Hermione leaned into his lips. She closed her eyes and sighed.

"You know we can stop whenever, Granger. All you have to do is say the word."

Her eyes popped back open. "Is that what you want? To make it easier?"

Silence. Hermione's heart felt heavy as she turned to look at him. When she did, Draco grabbed her chin, pulled her in and pressed his lips to hers, massaging them gently before slipping his tongue between them.

Hermione had been wrong before. During those rare moments when he kissed her like this - soft and sweet, her heart racing and palms sweating, making her feel like she was someone important, someone who mattered - she did not hate herself. Because a kiss like this made her feel something she had not felt in a long time. Safe. Beautiful. Cared for. Maybe even loved. Of course, she knew that was crazy. But wasn't it all?

"I want *you*, Granger," Draco said breathlessly into her mouth as he continued to kiss her. "In spite of it all, I want *you*. From now until the day we part. The rest … is up to you."

The two of them continued to hold each other, kissing tenderly, not even noticing the cold breeze that surrounded them. The night grew on and, still, they stayed like that. There was nothing passionate, nothing lustful, nothing desperate about that kiss, just that sweet and delicate feeling of comfort while having someone there. Someone to hold while being held. Someone who wants you. Someone who needs you. Someone who looks at you through eyes without judgment, and who knows your past but does not define you by it. Who understands that you have been through something horrible but does not treat you like you are made of glass. Draco and Hermione did all of these things for one another, and they wanted to hold onto those feelings for as long as they could.

"We should get to bed," said Draco as the chill in the air began to pick up, but his lips never left hers.

"Just a little bit longer," she said, moving her hand so it was resting above his heart. Still beating. Still real.

And so they stayed. Seconds turning into minutes, minutes turning into hours.

Neither of them had realized how much they needed this. It was something way more powerful than sex. A true connection.

It was not until Draco noticed how cold Hermione felt in his arms that he finally broke their contact. Eyes on her, he wrapped his hands underneath her legs and lifted her up, carrying her inside with great care.

Draco placed her onto his bed and helped her remove her robe and slippers before turning off the lights and climbing in next to her. The two recommenced their kissing, slowing slipping off each other's clothes until Draco was inside of her once more, thrusting softly until the faint light of day shined through the crack in the curtains. Not once did their lips part, their passion remaining delicate as they began to memorize each other with every touch.

"Hermione," Draco breathed into her mouth as her face radiated soft pleasure. "This …" He trailed off as her muscles pulsated around him, quickly bringing him his own release.

Draco gazed down at her as they both caught their breath, giving her one last kiss before rolling off and pulling her into him, taking a moment to breathe in the sweet scent of her hair before finally closing his eyes.

Part of Draco wished she had held on for a little bit longer, so he could have finished what he was going to say.

*This is closer.*

That was what he wanted to tell her. Because it was. This last time was the closest he had ever gotten to feeling completely satisfied. He had never shagged anyone like that before. Not even Pansy back when he almost sort of cared for her. But Hermione … he cared a lot. More than he should. And knowing that he was experiencing this intimate moment with someone who had somehow managed to seep into him … Well, that was better.

<center>XXX</center>

Draco and Bronson walked around the women's lingerie shop, both looking a bit overwhelmed with all of the options available to them. How did women ever make such decisions?

Noticing their wide, uncertain eyes, a shop girl walked up to them with a bright smile and asked, "Can I help you find something?"

"Uh, yes," said Bronson. "We're looking for some bras and sleepwear for my

girlfriend, and we're not exactly sure where to start. But nothing too sexy," he added quickly. "Just casual."

"Well, maybe not *just* casual," added Draco. "It wouldn't hurt to get her at least one sexy thing." His eyes immediately drifted to a Slytherin-green negligee in the corner. Merlin, that would look great on Hermione.

"Casual would really be just fine," said Bronson, trying hard not to notice that lustful look in Draco's eyes as he glanced around the shop.

"Okay then," said the shop girl. "What size cup is she?"

Bronson crinkled his forehead and pursed his lips. He looked over to see Draco doing the same. Huh. They had forgotten to ask.

Then Draco lifted his hand and said, "Like, a little less than a handful." He clenched his fingers like he was squeezing an imaginary breast.

The shop girl stared down at his hand for a moment before moving her eyes back to Bronson. "*Your* girlfriend?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Um … yeah," he said, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable. He was getting this horrible feeling that his imaginary girlfriend might be cheating on him.

"Well, judging by the size of your friend's hands, I'm going to guess she is either a B or a C cup. Is she petite?"

"Yes," they both answered.

"All right. This way, then."

While slowly following her, Bronson grabbed Draco's arm and said, "Hey, Malfoy. Stop answering questions about *my* girlfriend. It looks weird."

"Sorry," said Draco, his eyes now drifting to a lacy red nightie. There was so much potential here. Bloody waste that he could not just shop in places like this by himself.

It was a good hour before Draco and Bronson got out of there with several bags in hand. While Bronson had been pretty insistent about sticking with the basics - beige, white, and black - Draco had convinced him to get one lacy pink and black number to 'make her feel like a woman'. He also convinced him to get one bright-red one, by the slight chance that they might buy her a red jumper later.

They also bought her several pajama sets, so she would not have to borrow Draco's any longer, and one short nightdress for the 'warmer nights', as Draco had put it. Bronson did not even bother to argue that it was mid-November in London. Warmer nights were hardly a concern.

On their way out the door, the shop girl slipped something into Bronson's hand. "If things don't work out with your girlfriend," she whispered before eyeing Draco skeptically.

When they got outside, Bronson looked to see it was her name and address in case he wanted to owl her.

"You see what happens when you drag me out to places like this?" said Bronson, crumpling up the small piece of parchment. "This is why I like men. Women are so bloody conniving. I mean, I'm taken for Merlin's sake!"

Draco smirked. "Calm down, Bronson. You don't *actually* have to owl her."

"You want it?" Bronson held the shop girl's information out to him.

Draco shook his head and Bronson tossed it into the closest garbage bin.

"So how exactly do you know Hermione's breasts are a little less than a handful?" asked Bronson, glancing sideways at him.

"I'm a man, Bronson. I've looked." And he was not ashamed of it either. Actually, he really did not care what Bronson knew about him and Hermione. It was her that was against it. Apparently, he had already mentioned his disapproval of the situation before anything ever happened, and she did not want to ignite any fires.

"But never touched?"

Draco could not help but smirk. "Any particular reason you're asking me this?" he said, slipping into an alley and pulling out a cigarette. He offered one to Bronson and they leaned against the same wall, smoking just out of view of any wandering eyes.

"I don't know. But Hermione's become like a little sister to me, and I … I just haven't seen much of either of you over the past couple of weeks. Seems like you've wanted privacy or something."

"We do," said Draco honestly. He leaned his head back against the wall and blew a billow of smoke straight into the air. "I'm sure you've figured it out by now, Bronson, but Hermione was a slave. They had a trade every two months and the

next one is coming up. It was the night of the last one that she escaped and she hasn't been taking it well." It was not a lie. Every day she dreaded the anniversary of the infamous slave trade. It just was not why they wanted their privacy.

There was a long moment of silence before Draco turned his head to look at Bronson. He was staring at him, eyes wide and jaw slacken as his cigarette dangled out of his mouth.

"What?" asked Draco, creasing his eyebrows.

"What … did you call her?"

"Granger?" asked Draco, trying to replay his words in his head. He was unsure of what else he might have called her. He always called her Granger. Except in the bedroom, knowing very well that she got off on hearing her own name. But, he supposed he might have let her first name slip.

"No. That's not what you said."

"I'm positive it is," said Draco, throwing down his cigarette and putting it out with his foot. "Better get a move on, Bronson. We've barely gotten started."

Bronson nodded and did the same. Still, he could not shake the idea that something was off. Draco seemed different for some reason. Almost … happier. And it was really creeping him out. A few weeks ago, Hermione had finally admitted that she was the cupcake girl. *This* must have been the feeling she was talking about. How the nice gesture just seemed so … not Malfoy.

"Bloody fucking creepy," said Bronson under his breath as Draco led him towards a women's clothing shop. Jumpers, shirts, and trousers were next on their list.

<center>XXX</center>

"So how does it fit?" Draco called into Hermione's bedroom while sitting on the arm of the sofa.

"Not bad," she said, walking out in tight, black trousers and a fitted cream-colored jumper. "I actually think these might be a bit small." She began playing with the trousers' waistband. Not much give.

"I disagree," said Draco, beyond pleased that she was finally wearing something that showed off her feminine figure. His oversized jumpers and pajama bottoms just weren't doing it for him.

Hermione's cheeks flushed as she looked shyly back into her room. Currently, her bed was overrun with shopping bags. "The two of you went a bit overboard. I really don't need all of this."

"A woman needs options," said Draco, reaching out and grabbing her waist, pulling her until she was in-between his legs. "Figures that we would finally get you into some proper attire and all I can think about is tearing it off of you."

Hermione giggled as he began to nibble on her neck. She let him nestle there for a moment before pulling away. She gave him a quick kiss before heading back into her room.

"Next one," she said, digging through the bags and coming out with a red jumper. She then went through the bag of bras, her eyes freezing for a moment before pulling out the pink and black one. "I assume this is your doing?" she asked, holding it up for Draco to see.

He smirked. "Naturally. But there's a red one in there for that particular jumper. You can model that one for me later."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She looked back into the bag and started laughing. Then she pulled out the small nightdress. "Really, Draco? How'd you convince Bronson to let you buy me this one?"

"Warm nights," said Draco with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Warm nights? It's been a high of maybe six degrees out."

"Has it?" He raised his eyebrows. "Well, then, you're certainly lucky that I radiate such powerful body heat."

Hermione wanted to argue, but he was right. His body was like her own personal heater.

Finally locating the red bra, Hermione moved to shut the door.

"I've seen you naked, Granger."

"Not with the lights on, you haven't." She slammed it.

Draco frowned. Unfortunately, that statement was very true. Hermione often put her clothes back on before going to sleep and, when she didn't, she always made a point to be the first one up and out of bed. Draco had caught a hazy glimpse of her once through his fluttering eyelids, but she had quickly moved out of view. He

would have to eradicate this little problem immediately.

After Hermione was finished trying everything on, she put it all away in her dresser and wardrobe, smiling widely as she did so. Once that was done, she slipped into her robe and got ready to take a shower. When she walked back out to the living room, Draco grabbed her arm and pulled her towards the door.

"One more thing," he said, grabbing a bag from behind the sofa and handing it to her. "It wasn't a necessity but I thought you would like to have it."

Hermione smiled as she put the bag down on the back of the sofa and pulled out a long, black cloak. It was of great quality and felt incredibly soft in her hands.

"I never wanted to ask, but I always figured the one you have now was my aunt's."

"It was," she said, her smile only growing as she continued to run the material through her fingertips.

"So I was right to assume you would want one of your own, then?" asked Draco, rubbing his hand comfortingly along her lower back.

Hermione nodded. "Thank you, Draco." She looked at him with tears in her eyes. "For all of it. I know I don't exactly have a current need for any of these things but - "

Draco silenced her with a kiss. Her stomach fluttered as he continued to rub the small of her back, his other hand running up her arm until his fingers were playing with the loose strands of her hair.

When he pulled away, he flashed her a smile with his crooked lips and said, "Think nothing of it. Besides, you're going to need all of this stuff eventually. You won't be trapped here forever."

Hermione's heart sunk a little at the realization that he was right. "I've been trapped before, Draco, and *this*," she put her hands onto his chest, "isn't it."

Standing on tiptoe, Hermione gave him a quick kiss before going over to the closet and hanging her new cloak up in it. She grabbed the old one off of its hanger and went out to the balcony, concealing herself with magic before setting it ablaze. Draco came out and grabbed her hand. They stood in silence for a moment and watched it burn. When there was nothing left but ashes, Hermione put the last remnants of fire out with her wand and sent the remains flying off into the night sky.

Hermione stared blankly after them for a moment, her eyes not focusing until she felt Draco tugging on her hand. She let him pull her inside, her feet not stopping until his did.

"Granger?"

She looked up to see Draco watching her. When their eyes met, he pulled her body into his and tucked her hair behind her ear.

"You all right?" he asked.

Hermione smiled and nodded. "I'm just glad to be rid of the thing. It's like a weight has been lifted." She began rolling her shoulders. "Now, I just need that shower to relax."

Hermione tried to move away but Draco held her firmly in place. "Any chance I might join you?"

Her cheeks turned bright crimson as she quickly stared anywhere but at him. "Um … I don't … I mean, I'm not …"

"Don't you think it's time you let me see you with the lights on?" he said as he ran his tongue along her ear.

"I …"

"Don't you want to see me?"

Hermione's body began to shudder against his. Draco took this as a surefire sign that he was right, so he lifted her up and sat her on the edge of the kitchen counter.

"You can see me first if you want, Granger," he said, settling himself between her legs and rubbing against her.

She tried to hide it by biting her lip, but there was no disguising the throaty moan that escaped her.

"All you have to do is undress me," whispered Draco before catching her lips in a fervent kiss.

Hermione continued to moan into his mouth while he grinded against her, her shaky hands slowly making their way into his jumper. She pulled at the edges awkwardly for a moment before finally lifting it and, with a great bit of assistance,

yanking it over his head. At first, her eyes drifted to the armband he had gotten into the habit of wearing, but that was not where she wanted to focus. So she moved her gaze back to his bare chest, staring at it for a moment, creamy, chiseled and perfect, before running her hands along it, pausing slightly when she found a small, white scar.

"Two years ago, during a battle with the resistance," he said without her having to ask. "One of them hit me with a spell that sent me flying into the edge of a table."

"Are there more?" she asked, looking up at him hopefully.

"Oh, yes." Draco took her hand and began helping her trace his form. He brought it up his ribcage and stopped somewhere near the top of it. "Broke a few of these when the Dark Lord used the Cruciatus Curse on me before I was back in his good graces. I eventually taught myself not to squirm so much. It really is more beneficial in the long run." And then he brought her hand down to his left hip, letting her fingers pull down his trousers a bit. "A member of the resistance got me here with a Stinging Hex."

"A Stinging Hex did *that*?" she asked, rubbing at it with her index finger.

"It was a bloody powerful one. I didn't know there were variations of it, but, fuck, I learned." Draco then let go of her hand and turned around. "The one just below my right shoulder blade is from when a Bludger hit me during a Quidditch game against Ravenclaw in fifth year. And the one here on my arm," he pointed, "was from when I fell out of a tree when I was seven."

When Draco turned back around, he was happy to see that Hermione was smiling.

"I have more," he said, leaning back in and purposely hovering his lips above hers, "but you'll have to find them on your own."

Hermione's head lunged forward and she engulfed his lips with her own, kissing him vigorously while running her hands along his smooth skin. Before long, they were both gasping for air, and she caught his eyes with a lustful look before moving her hands down to his trousers.

She had just begun to undo them when the door to the flat clicked, and then burst open. Bronson stepped inside, quickly freezing when he caught sight of Draco practically on top of Hermione on the kitchen counter. They both turned and looked at him, their eyes wide and guilt-stricken as they realized they had just been caught red-handed. And, speaking of hands, Hermione was quick to pull hers off of Draco, but then she had no clue where she was supposed to put them

and they just hung awkwardly in the air. Draco pulled back and she was finally able to use them to fidget with her robe.

"Evening, mate," said Draco in an even tone. "Something we can help you with?"

Bronson stared at him openmouthed. He slowly lifted a box. "I, uh … Quigley brought me dessert from the restaurant before he went out and I … I thought you two might like some."

There was an awkward silence as no one moved from their current positions. Hermione could not even look in Bronson's direction. She was too embarrassed and did not want him to see how bloody red she was.

"I'm sorry," said Bronson once he got sick of listening to the clock tick. "Have I interrupted something?"

Draco said, "Yes," while Hermione said, "No."

"Because it looked like I interrupted something. Like maybe Malfoy was making sure that your breasts really were slightly less than a handful."

"Hey, my hands were nowhere near her breasts," Draco said defensively. "They were on the inside of her thighs."

"Okay," said Hermione, jumping off the counter and standing in front of him, since Bronson was leaning forward, so obviously preparing to strike. "Bronson, I can see where this is going and I cannot stress enough how important it is for you to stay calm."

"Stay calm?" said Bronson, taking a moment to slam the still-open door before walking forward. "Are you fucking kidding me? He's a bloody Death Eater, Hermione! And *you're* a Muggle-born! What the bloody hell are you thinking? I thought you said you weren't a masochist!"

"I … I'm not," she said weakly. "I can't help -"

"You can't help what? Your feelings?"

Hermione blushed.

"This is fucking insane, Hermione! *You're* fucking insane!"

Tears filled her eyes and she quickly looked off to the side so he wouldn't see them. There was that word again. *Insane.*

"Hey!" shouted Draco, putting a comforting hand on her waist before stepping in front of her. "Don't you dare! Don't you fucking dare talk to her like that!" With flaming eyes, Draco looked back at Hermione and said, "Granger, go and take your shower. I'll take care of this."

"But -"

"It's fine," he said, squeezing her hand. "I won't do anything rash. I'm not you."

Hermione gave him a faint smile. "Like you're any better." She gave Bronson one last disappointed look before turning and heading into the washroom.

The moment the door was closed, Draco turned back to Bronson and said, "Outside." He grabbed his jumper off of the ground and put it back on.

"I'm not going -"

"I said, outside!" demanded Draco before walking towards the balcony.

After letting out a loud grunt, Bronson followed him and shut the door. Both of them put up Silencing Charms before standing on opposite ends with their arms crossed.

"What the fuck, Malfoy?" Bronson began, staring daggers at him as he tried to keep himself somewhat composed in the small space.

"'What the fuck', what, Bronson? None of this is any of your fucking business!"

"Well, I'm making it my fucking business! Someone needs to be the voice of reason for you two! I mean … FUCK! What the bloody hell are you thinking?"

Draco smirked. "Isn't it obvious?" Bronson lunged forward but Draco quickly took out his wand and pointed it at him. "Stop right there."

Bronson froze. "What the fuck you gonna do, Malfoy? Use the Cruciatus Curse on me? I'm curious, what reasoning would you give the Dark Lord for doing it?" he asked venomously. "Perhaps you were putting someone in their place?" He paused.

Draco said nothing.

"Oh, come on, Malfoy. We both know you'd fucking *love* to do it, so why don't you already?" Bronson baited.

Draco glowered at him before slowly lowering his wand. "All of these years, and you still think so little of me." He sighed. "No, Bronson, I'm not going to use the Cruciatus Curse on you, and I never would. Punch you, sure. Send you flying against the wall and bind you so you don't hit me back; I'm not against that either."

Bronson's face softened slightly.

"You can think whatever the fuck you want about me," said Draco, slipping his wand back into his pocket. "I don't fucking care. But don't you dare, don't you fucking dare ever come up here again if you're going to insult *her*! She's been through enough in her fucking life! She doesn't need to hear such horrible insults from someone she trusts!"

Bronson cocked his head in curiosity. "What are you talking about? I didn't insult -"

"Yes you fucking did!" shouted Draco. "In there just now! Didn't you see her? Didn't you see her fucking eyes as she tried to stop herself from crying? *You* did that! You fucking did that when you called her insane!"

Bronson pursed his lips and glanced upwards as he tried to recall everything he had said inside. "If I said that, I'm sure I didn't mean it literally."

"It doesn't matter! Her mind has been fucked with, Bronson! It was her most valuable possession and she's been working so fucking hard to get it back! And, then, in one fucking second you make her doubt herself! That's all it takes with her! That's all it fucking takes for her to lose it! To not want to try anymore!"

Bronson cocked his head again as he continued to gaze dazedly at Draco, his mouth agape as he tried to process everything he was hearing. Between the lines, of course.

"What the fuck are you staring at?"

Bronson blinked.

"Seriously, what is your fucking problem? Hermione and I are both adults and we know what we're fucking doing!"

Bronson blinked again. "Do you?"

"Of course!" shouted Draco. "We're bloody aware that the circumstances are not exactly ideal, but she *knows* we can stop whenever! I've *told* her! I've told her over and over again that all she has to do is fucking say the word and we'll stop! Because I'm not fucking stupid! I *know* this is a fucked up situation! It's sick and it's

twisted and it's wrong, but I can't stop! I can't fucking stop until I know it's what *she* wants!"

Bronson cocked his head further. "Why?"

"Because!" Because Draco wanted her. Needed her. Desired her. Because no one else had ever felt so bloody perfect while tangled in his arms, against his lips, around his cock. And he would be damned if he gave up those feelings before he needed to. But he gave Bronson no further explanation. 'Because' would just have to do.

Straightening his head, Bronson stared at Draco for a long while, stuck in a blank expression before his lips slowly began to curve into a smile. "Holy fuck."

"What?" asked Draco, more than a little disturbed by this wizard's growing amusement.

"Nothing, I just … I fucking get it now."

"Get what?"

Bronson laughed and said, "The fact that you don't know *only* makes it better!"

"What are you -?"

"Don't you bloody see, Malfoy?"

Now, it was Draco's turn to blink.

"Holy crap, you really don't!" He laughed louder. "You *like* her!"

Draco's eyes widened.

"You fucking like Hermione! Ah, shit, I'm sorry, mate! If I'd have known, I wouldn't have reacted that way earlier. I seriously just thought you were looking for a convenient shag, but this … this is all right! I can definitely get onboard with this!"

His jaw dropping slightly, Draco really had no idea what to say. "I wouldn't … I mean, I would never … to her …"

"It's all right, mate. I know," said Bronson, stepping forward and putting his hand on Draco's shoulder. "I mean, I still think this is going to fuck with both of your heads in the long run but, hey, who am I to judge? You know how many straight men I've been involved with? *Big* mistake. Mistakes, really. One right after another. Hmm

…"

As Bronson pondered his own life, Draco began to fidget from foot to foot, looking around uncomfortably as the words finally started to sink in. Bronson thought he *liked* her. That he, Draco Malfoy, actually liked Hermione Granger. The girl he used to constantly make fun of in school. Who had suffered horribly because of something he had done. Who was in the shower now … soaking wet and lathered in the sweet smelling soap he had purchased for her. And alone. So, so alone. *Fuck*, he wanted to be in that shower with her. But not because he liked her. Because he liked fucking her. There had to be a difference.

"Well, I suppose I should probably get out of your hair. It looked like I was interrupting something before. Here." Bronson handed him the box he was still holding. "The dessert's all yours. They say chocolate is an aphrodisiac." He winked before heading back inside. Draco followed after him. "Have fun," he said before heading out the front door.

Draco went over to the kitchen and put the small box on the counter. He opened it and took a good look at the piece of chocolate cake in there. Picking it up with his hands, he took a big bite before putting it back and closing the box again, his eyes suddenly drifting over to the washroom door. The shower was still running strong. His efforts earlier did not have to be wasted.

Without another thought, Draco went to the door and walked inside, not even bothering to knock. He immediately began stripping until he was wearing nothing but his armband.

"Draco?" he heard Hermione call from behind the steamy shower door. "Is that you?"

"Yes," he said, walking over and standing so his silhouette was just out of view. "I was hoping we could finish what we started earlier."

"Oh, umm … that sure ended quickly. Bronson isn't dead, is he?"

Unfortunately, "No. He got over it pretty quickly. So can I come in?"

"Uh … how did you convince him to -?"

"Quit stalling, Granger. I have a large scar on my arse from when someone in a duel sent me skidding across the ground that I would just *love* to show you."

He heard her giggle on the other side. "I … I suppose it would be all right. If you

came in, that is."

Draco immediately moved and reached for the door.

"Just … don't ask for stories on mine. Not … not yet."

"Deal," he said before slowly opening the door, a large gust of steam seeping out and obstructing his vision.

When it finally started to clear, he could just make out Hermione's silhouette in the back corner. He stepped closer. Her hands moved so that they were covering her body, so he kept his eyes upward, catching hers as she gazed back at him nervously while sucking in her lips.

Draco smirked while taking another step forward. "Ease up, Granger. The point of this is so I can see you. Remember?"

Hermione shyly looked away.

"All right then. I'm not looking yet." He kept his eyes focused on her face as he continued to step forward. When Draco reached her, he began to rub her arms, easing them to her sides before taking her hands in his. "But *you* should look now."

Hermione glanced up and kept her eyes on Draco's as he took a step back. She bit her bottom lip.

"Go on, Granger. I'm not embarrassed."

Her eyes slowly trailed downward, taking a moment to stare at each and every part of him. His neck. His shoulders. Chest. Abs. Hips. Her breath sucking in when she finally reached his cock, growing hard as she continued to gaze at it. She instinctually let go of Draco's hand and reached out to touch it.

He let out a throaty groan before saying, "You like that?"

Hermione said nothing, but when she looked up at him there was no mistaking the lust in her eyes. Draco pressed forward and crashed his lips into hers, using his freehand to push her wet hair out of her face. Then he moved it downwards, not stopping until he reached her wet core, massaging it gently before plunging a finger into her, all the while she continued to pump his cock.

"Lift your legs around me, Granger."

Hermione nodded nervously before wrapping her arms around his shoulders, letting him help lift her against the shower wall. She linked her legs around his waist, her body trembling as he continued to kiss her, lips moving to her neck as he slowly began to push himself inside of her.

"You all right?" he asked, breathing hard against her neck.

"Yes," she answered, holding her head against his neck. "You can move."

Draco nodded before plummeting his hungry lips back onto her neck, sucking on it aggressively while he quickly began thrusting in and out of her. There would be no going slow tonight. There was too much buildup. Too much anticipation. Too much bloody fucking time wasted with Bronson. And Draco needed to prove something. He needed to prove that this was just fucking. A matter of convenience with someone he just happened to desire. Someone he happened to care for. Nothing more. You could care for someone without liking them, you could fuck them every night and every morning and fall asleep with them in your arms but still keep those feelings separate. It was not impossible.

Hermione's nails began to dig into his back as his thrusting became more vigorous. He moved his hand back into her hair and pulled her head back, staring into her amber eyes for a moment before heading back in for those lips. Those divinely delicious lips he simply could not get enough of.

"You taste like chocolate," she said with a breathy giggle.

Draco continued to kiss her urgently, practically smothering her tongue with his while he moved both of his hands to her ass cheeks, using them as leverage so that he could thrust faster and harder.

Suddenly, Hermione brought one of her hands between them and started touching herself. "Oh, fuck!" he shouted as his arousal only grew. She had never done that before.

"Mmm … Draco. Fuck, Draco!"

Her head fell back as she quickly began to fall apart. The obscene language was new too, and Draco found himself going absolutely mad with lust. He began thrusting even faster, his hips nothing but a blur as her eyes closed and a loud moan escaped her lips.

"Fuck … fuck, Hermione!"

Draco buried his head in her neck as he continued to thrust through his release,

not wanting this incredible feeling to end just yet. *Closer*. Every time was so much closer to that complete satisfaction he craved.

Finally beginning to slow, Draco's legs became weak and he collapsed to the shower floor, taking Hermione down with him. She hugged her arms around him tighter, holding him against her while she attempted to catch her breath.

"Fucking beautiful," he whispered into her ear before running his tongue along it, all while she was planting lazy kisses on his neck. "I don't know how you fucking top yourself every time."

Hermione laughed shyly against him.

"Can I see you, now?" asked Draco, moving his lips over to her jaw.

Hermione clenched her eyes shut before nodding against him. She slackened her hold on his shoulders and let him slowly push her back, not stopping until she was, once again, pressed against the shower wall.

The warm water continued to pour down on them as Draco sucked in his breath, taking Hermione in for the first time. All of her.

Yes, there were scars, but he hardly noticed them. How could he when there was so much more here? So much beauty. Milky skin with a few spattered freckles, completely untainted by tacky tan lines. Her breasts were perfect. Still perky and young with vibrant pink nipples, obviously a side effect of still being in the shower. He could not help himself, so he reached up and flicked one.

"Draco!" she shouted, trying to seem offended while she smacked his arm.

"Sorry," he said before stretching down and kissing it. "Better?"

"For you, I'm sure."

Draco flashed his crooked grin before pulling back again, his eyes continuing to trail downward, his fingers tracing circles around her bellybutton before he finally landed on their crotches, his cock still soft inside of her. She shifted, signifying her discomfort, making it twitch.

"Probably best if I pull this out now," he said while slowly backing away from her. But then he kept going, instinctually leaning downward so his head was level with the lovely haven his cock had just vacated. He could not help himself. He wanted to see all of her tonight. So he reached forward and pulled her nether-lips apart. Hermione fidgeted but he held her still.

Draco breathed her in. The aroma was fucking intoxicating. He wanted to taste it. So he did, running his tongue along her slit once before engulfing her in his mouth.

"Draco, no!" she shouted, trying to move out of the way.

"Relax, Hermione," he said, moving his hands up to rub her hips. "Let me do this for you. I promise you'll be thanking me later."

"B-but -"

"Shh," he said, continuing to rub her soothingly. "Relax."

Hermione bit her bottom lip, letting her head fall back against the wall as he continued to pleasure her with his expert tongue. As a slave, several men had done this to her in an attempt to loosen her up. She had always hated it. But this … it had definitely never felt like this.

A soft moan escaped her lips as he began circling the tip of his tongue around her clit, her hands softly threading his hair as her hips slowly began to buck. He smirked before bringing one of his hands down and inserting two fingers inside of her, pumping them slowly as her body began to weaken under his touch. He had always been an expert at making women reach that second orgasm in record time, and it was not long before she was pulsating against him.

Draco stayed down there until her writhing body began to ease, giving her soaking lips one last gentle kiss before sitting up and going for the other ones.

Hermione barely let him make contact before she was pushing him off. "Okay, Draco. You've gotten what you wanted. You've seen *all* of me. Now, don't you think it's time you let me see all of you?"

"What did you have in mind?" he asked, smiling as he leaned inwards once more.

Draco was a bit surprised when Hermione moved away, suddenly grabbing his left arm and yanking at the soaking wet armband he still wore.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, trying to pull his arm away.

"Unashamed, right?" she said, managing to successfully maneuver the armband off and tossing it aside, revealing the skull tattoo with the snake protruding from its mouth underneath.

Hermione barely got a chance to even see the outline of it before Draco was pulling his arm away and hiding it against his chest.

"I cover this for you," he said.

Hermione frowned. "Draco, we both know that is not entirely true. I promise I'm not going to pull away from you like I did that first time. I just … I want to see. I … I've never really looked at it before."

Draco looked down at his arm reluctantly.

Reaching out, Hermione began to rub it soothingly, moving her head forward so that she could catch Draco's storm-cloud eyes with her own. "Please, Draco. This mark is your equivalent of my scars. You were given it against your will."

"Not entirely," he said truthfully, ashamedly.

But, under her touch, Draco's arm began to ease. He let it slacken and Hermione took it in her hands, staring carefully at the Dark Mark as she traced it with her fingertips, the two of them overcome with heavy silence as he watched her in fascination.

Eventually, she looked up at him, her amber eyes sparkling as she crinkled her nose and said, "It's not very attractive, is it? I know that You-Know-Who is evil and all, but did he have to seriously go along with the whole skull cliché?"

Draco could not help but laugh. "I never asked. Ironically, he doesn't see himself as evil at all."

Hermione smiled and held up his arm. "Well, then maybe you should have a discussion with him about redesigning his logo."

Draco laughed harder. He could not stop himself from reaching out and stroking her cheek before pulling her in for a soft kiss. He clonked his forehead against hers and the two of them continued to gaze at one another, her hand trailing down his arm until it was entwined with his.

Draco had never felt like this before. Accepted by someone whose opinion greatly mattered to him.

Other women made Draco sick, wanting him for his Death Eater status, for his Dark Mark, for the part of himself that he hated the most. But not Hermione. She wanted him in spite of all of that, somehow looking past this small piece of him, a piece that so many thought defined him. But it didn't. Voldemort did not define him. He was something long before the Dark Lord came into his life, and now, thanks to Hermione, he was starting to think that he might be able to be something after.

"Thanks, Granger," he said while continuing to stroke her cheek with his thumb. "I needed that."

"You know, Draco, I would not be totally against you calling me Hermione. Outside of the bedroom, or … or shower."

Once their actual shower was finished, Draco and Hermione headed to bed, keeping the lights on while she lay wrapped in his arms, telling him the story behind each and every scar, feeling relief every time he found one from her life before the war.

As they both slowly began to drift off to slip, Draco started to wonder if perhaps Bronson was right. Maybe he did like Hermione. He definitely enjoyed her company more than any other girl's, but he had always just assumed that this was because she was always there. Not to mention his current desire for her.

But Draco had had her now, many times, and it still was not enough. He found himself constantly craving more of her, and this need was not just fueled by sex. Because he did not just want her physically. He wanted all of her. Body and soul. Was that what liking someone felt like? Or … or was it something else? Entirely.

# Chapter 12: When I Get Home

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"Two months!" shouted Bronson as he popped open a bottle of champagne, ignoring Draco's scowl as he let it rain over his white carpet. There was a reason they loved magic so much, and easy cleanup was part of it.

"Thanks, Bronson, but there is really no need for this," said Hermione, leaning very stiffly against the kitchen counter while he poured the champagne into three crystal glasses. "It just doesn't seem right to celebrate my freedom when so many others are suffering through the slave trade as we speak."

"Come on, Hermione. Can't you just be selfish for once?" he asked while handing her a glass. "You're a free witch, more or less. You're shagging regularly," he motioned towards Draco, handing him a glass as he nodded in agreement. "For the first time in years, you have clothes *and* a wand -"

"And a chocolate bar," added Draco, flashing her a quick wink.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, but she could not hide her faint smile.

"Uh, right," said Bronson, clearly not getting the joke. "So shall we toast?"

"Fine," said Hermione, holding up her glass. "But if I'm still here in two months, we won't be doing this again."

Draco stiffened at the realization that she probably would not still be here when that time came. Instead, she would be with Potter and Weasel. *With* Weasel. Maybe physically? He cringed at the thought. *Never*. He would never, ever let that -

"Uh, Malfoy, we doing this?"

Draco looked up to see Bronson and Hermione staring at him, both of their glasses slightly raised.

"Right," said Draco, lifting his own. "So are we supposed to say something?"

"Oh, good idea!" exclaimed Bronson. "Go on, then."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Me?"

Bronson smiled. "Uhuh. Tell us how you feel, mate."

"How I feel?" repeated Draco, creasing his forehead as he glanced at Hermione, who was looking at him expectantly. "Well, I'm bloody glad you're not a slave anymore. But I'm not glad that I haven't had a chance to kill anyone but fucking Flint for owning you yet. I do plan to."

Hermione smiled.

"Is this how Death Eaters woo women?" asked Bronson, darting his curious eyes between them.

"Pretty sure it's just me," said Draco.

"Well, I'm wooed." Hermione said proudly. "Shall we drink then?"

"Clearly, I'm going to have to make the toast," said Bronson, lifting his glass a little higher. He cleared his throat. "Hermione Granger, I am so grateful to have the honor, no, the privilege of knowing you in this bleak and desolate world. You have overcome obstacles and conquered fears, always coming out on top and -"

"Cheers!" interrupted Draco, clanking his glass against both of theirs before chugging his champagne down.

Hermione clanked Bronson's before doing the same, making a face as the bubbles tickled her nose.

Bronson huffed. "Are you two not even going to let me finish my speech?"

"Nope," said Draco, taking the bottle off of the counter and pouring him and Hermione some more champagne. Bronson pouted before drinking his down, then held his glass out for a refill.

Just as Hermione was taking another sip, the alarm went off, signaling that someone was about to Floo into the flat. Her eyes went wide and she swallowed her mouthful down quickly before dashing into her bedroom, glass in hand. She shut the door just as a 'swooshing' sound entered the living room. Draco and Bronson both looked over to see Theo step out of the fireplace, dusting the soot off of his nice cloak. He glanced up, his eyes darting between them before finally settling on the bottle of champagne still in Draco's hand.

"Am I interrupting something?"

"No," said Draco, putting the bottle down. "Bronson here -"

Bronson nodded.

"- works at a restaurant, and, on some nights, he likes to steal the good shit."

"True statement," said Bronson, taking a sip.

"Tonight, he was kind enough to share," said Draco.

"How do you two know each other?" asked Theo, still standing near the fireplace.

Draco took another sip and swallowed hard. "He lives downstairs."

"Oh," said Theo, finally walking over. "So he's the git who gets you those bloody Muggle cigarettes?"

Bronson's face lit up. "Oh, Malfoy, you've talked about me -"

"This is the good shit?" asked Theo, looking closely at the label on the bottle of champagne. "What sort of cheap establishment do you work at?" He took a sip straight out of the bottle.

Glowering at him, Bronson said, "One that, luckily, isn't often populated by pretentious pricks with absolutely no manners and -"

"Did you fucking want something, Theo?" asked Draco, pulling the bottle away from him. "If you would like some of that then get a bloody glass."

"Sorry," said Theo, wiping at his mouth. "I just need a bloody drink. Can we just get the fuck out of here and go get a bloody drink?"

Draco frowned. "Everything all right?"

"No," said Theo, biting his cheek in an attempt to hold in tears. "Can we fucking go already?"

Draco looked at Bronson, who shrugged. "Fine, you go ahead. I'll meet you there."

"Why?" asked Theo.

"I need to use the bloody loo. What's with all the questions?"

"I'll fucking wait, just hurry it up." Theo rubbed at his eyes.

Draco flared his nostrils before glancing slyly at Hermione's door.

"Hey, mate," said Bronson, putting a hand on Theo's shoulder. "You look like you could use a cigarette. Wanna come have one with me on the balcony while Malfoy takes a piss?"

"Bloody fine," said Theo, walking towards the sliding glass door.

Bronson crossed his arms and stared after him. "Straight, right?" he whispered.

"Uh, yeah," said Draco. "Why?"

"No reason. I just often find myself attracted to straight arseholes. Any chance he might forget his sexual preference if intoxicated enough?"

"Doubtful," said Draco, cringing as the horrible image of Bronson taking advantage of a drunken Theo entered his head. "Just get the fuck out there."

"Done," said Bronson with a wide grin. He took his cigarettes out of his pocket and headed for the open door, making sure to shut it behind him.

As soon as they were out of sight, Draco went over to Hermione's door and slipped inside. She was presently sitting on her bed with his book on mastering Legilimency and Occlumency in her lap, since she had expressed an interest in learning both. Her eyes glanced up as he entered.

"Hermione, I -"

"Yes, I heard," she said with a frown. "I suppose you have to go and be with your friend if you want to keep up appearances."

"I would rather stay here," he said, sitting down next to her and meeting her for a kiss. "You know, celebrate your freedom properly." He smiled before kissing her again.

"There will be plenty of time for that later. Now, go on. Take any longer in the loo and he might get suspicious." She smirked.

"I hope you know I plan to shag you senseless when I get back."

"I figured as much," she said, giving him one last kiss before pushing him off of her bed. "Go, Draco."

He grunted before reluctantly slipping back out the door. Bloody Theo and his fucking problems. He had no idea how much of a cock block he was being right now.

Outside, Theo was leaning over the edge of the balcony, staring straight ahead in brooding silence while Bronson tried to make conversation. He turned when he heard the door open. "Ready?" he asked, already putting out the cigarette he was holding.

"Yeah, sure," said Draco, stepping out of the way.

Theo took a step forward before looking at Bronson and saying, "You coming?"

"Not yet," said Bronson, smirking as his mind filled with dirty thoughts, "but if that's an invitation -"

"He can't fucking come, Theo," Draco said quickly. "Not if we want to Floo."

Theo reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the stones they had gotten from the Ministry. "I have an extra one. Kept it in case I wanted to bring some slag home." He smirked, obviously proud of his cleverness.

"Oh, sweet," said Bronson, taking the stone from him.

"But his name isn't registered."

"Who's going to bloody check?" said Theo with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's fine.

I've already done it maybe ten times. No one has a fucking clue."

"Ten times, huh?" said Bronson. "And all with different women, I assume?"

Theo's smirk was response enough.

"Looks like we have a mini Malfoy on our hands. Well, let's get on with it," he said, following Theo inside and heading for the fireplace.

Theo grabbed a handful of Floo powder, turned to Draco and said, "Leaky Cauldron?"

Draco nodded.

Theo tossed the powder into the fireplace, stepped into the green flames and was quickly sucked away to the pub. Bronson was about to follow him when Draco held a hand out to stop him.

"We need to get him fucking drunk and make him forget all about that stone. Got it?"

"You're the boss," said Bronson with a salute before following Theo through the Floo.

By the time Draco got to the Leaky Cauldron, Theo already had a table and a bottle of firewhiskey in his hands. He was chugging from it hungrily and Draco had a pretty good feeling that he did not intend to share, so he ordered another bottle for him and Bronson.

As it turned out, the reason Theo was so upset was because his father had called him out about his and Draco's lack of progress in just about every mission against the resistance right in front of Lord Voldemort. Apparently, he was convincing enough that the Dark Lord used Legilimency on him - after using the Cruciatus Curse several times to free his mind, of course - to make sure he had no lack of commitment. But that was not the real problem.

"You should have seen the look on my father's fucking face when he found out I wasn't a bloody spy! It was like he was disappointed! Like he wanted me to get fucking executed or something! I mean, can you believe it?"

Actually, Draco could. But he kept quiet about it because he had to. He had to cooperate. For Hermione's sake.

"I'm his fucking son and he doesn't even care if I'm dead!"

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true," said Bronson, trying to be supportive, but one glance at Draco and he knew that it most definitely was. "You Death Eaters sure have twisted families. Hey, barmaid!" He lifted his hand and a young girl hurried over, making sure to flutter her eyelashes at him. "Let's see. How about … one, two, three … nine! Nine shots of your finest whiskey! Whiskey?" he asked, glancing around for reassurance.

"Gin!" shouted Theo. "I need fucking gin!"

"His comfort drink," Draco said to Bronson.

"Gin it is!" he said, smiling at the barmaid. She blushed before scurrying off.

"You have a pretty good way with the ladies for a fucking pansy," Theo spurted out before taking another swig from his bottle. It was already half gone.

Draco gaped at him. "How did you know he was gay?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"It's bloody obvious, isn't it? He's been eye-fucking me since I stepped out of the bloody Floo."

Bronson smirked. "Guilty. Forgive Malfoy. He's known me for years and only figured it out just over a month ago. And not even on his own. He had to be *told*."

"Hmm …" Theo brought his bottle back to his lips and chugged some more.

The barmaid returned a moment later. She put the shots of gin on the table before slyly slipping Bronson her information. He was about to toss it when Theo stretched forward and plucked it out of his hand.

"Yoink!"

"Oh, Malfoy, he's so bloody adorable, I could just put him in my pocket."

"You seem a lot gayer tonight," said Draco, grabbing a shot and putting it in front of him.

"It's because I've found the new object of my affection," said Bronson, doing the same. "Shall we toast, then?"

"No," said Draco and Theo before downing their shots.

Bronson took his slowly. He then slipped another one in front of Theo. "So tell me

more about your father."

"He's a fucking prick," said Theo, quickly taking the new shot. "Always has been."

"I see," said Bronson, sliding another one over. "And what makes him so prick-like?"

"He just is. Been a bloody follower of the Dark Lord since his teen years and he doesn't want anyone to outshine him. Not even his own fucking bloodline." Another shot down.

Draco watched closely as Bronson slipped yet another one towards Theo. He smirked before taking one more for himself.

It was not long before Theo's ramblings became completely incoherent. He closed his eyes and rested his cheek on his hand, beginning to drift off to a state of unconsciousness while Draco and Bronson finished their bottle. Only, about three-quarters of the way through, Draco realized that he was drinking the bulk of it.

*Shit.*

It was only then that he noticed he was starting to get a little drunk. "Why the fuck aren't you drinking more?" demanded Draco, more than a little pissed since Hermione did not like to shag him while he was intoxicated.

"Because I don't want to get drunk," answered Bronson. "All I need is a little buzz."

"Why?" Draco asked suspiciously.

"No reason," he said, grinning widely as he watched Theo catch himself after falling off of his hand.

"*Fuck. No*," said Draco, his eyes flaming. "I don't fucking think so, Bronson."

"What?" he shrugged. "I would never do anything without permission first. I'm not a bloody Death Eater."

"Th'fuck yeh talkin' bout?" mumbled Theo, before settling back on his hand and chewing something that clearly was not there.

"Nothing, Sleepy," said Bronson, poking his cheek affectionately.

Draco shook his head in disapproval. "You're fucking sick."

Bronson just smirked.

Once their bottle was finished, namely thanks to Draco, they dragged an essentially unconscious Theo towards the fireplace, but he was too drunk to Floo himself home.

Bronson eventually had to toss him over his shoulder and carry him outside while Draco used his wand to signal a carriage. He was already feeling a bit woozy and had to brace himself against the wall while Bronson loaded Theo inside. Once that was done, he tried to crawl in after him, but only ended up collapsing against the side of the carriage.

"Fuck …" said Draco, falling to a crouching position. "I can't fucking take him home."

"Why not?" asked Bronson. "Too eager to go back and shag Hermi -" He caught himself, stared at Theo lying sprawled across the bench and gulped. "Your pseudo-girlfriend?"

"My *what*?" asked Draco, crinkling his nose.

"Who th'fuck yeh shaggin'?" asked Theo, popping up suddenly. "He fuckin' say Hermy?"

"No," said Draco, reaching in and pushing him back down. His head started to spin again, so he brought his hand up to brace it. "I feel fucking sick. I'm not going to do him much good."

"I'll do it!" said Bronson, gladly pushing Draco out of the way.

"Fuck. No."

"Why not?" he whined.

"Well, if we completely overlook the fact that I don't trust you -" Draco gulped. He needed to get out of here soon. "- it's also too fucking dangerous. He lives with his father and you'd have to Floo back to my place -"

"My father's not," *hiccup*, "fuckin' 'round. He and Raba-fucker are doin' some shit in Aus -" *hiccup*, "Aus -" *hiccup*, "-tralia."

"What the fuck are they doing there?" asked Draco, suddenly feeling a lot more sober. Then the next wave of nausea hit.

"Dun-fuckin-no. Who yeh talkin' bout before?"

"No one," Draco said firmly.

"It's settled then!" said Bronson, stepping into the carriage and taking a seat. "Don't you worry about a thing, Malfoy. I'll make sure to take great care of your friend." He winked before slamming the door. The carriage took off into the air immediately.

"Fucking prick."

Draco just had enough time to run inside and make it to the washroom before he was vomiting vigorously into the toilet. He waited a bit and got it all out before cleaning himself off and Flooing home.

When he got there, he stumbled into his room and collapsed onto the bed, more than a little disappointed to find it empty. It was another minute before Hermione's door opened and she appeared in his doorway with a small blanket wrapped around her.

"You're drunk," she said.

"No shit," said Draco, holding out his arms and waiting for her to come climb into them.

Hermione walked over to the bed slowly and let Draco pull her into him. She nuzzled into the crook of his arm, letting his warm body consume her.

The two of them were silent for a long while and Hermione assumed Draco had fallen asleep. But then he turned his head and, when she looked up, he was staring at her.

"Why are you never in my bed when I get home?"

Hermione pursed her eyebrows. "I'm sorry?"

"On nights I go out, when I get home you're always in your own bed, but you've been sleeping in mine for weeks now. Why aren't you just here?"

"Oh, I … I don't know."

Draco reached up and stroked her cheek. He sighed. "Is it because you think I might come home with another witch?"

Hermione looked away from him and blushed. She had not realized it before, but something in her gut told her that he was right. This is exactly what she thought.

"Because I wouldn't …" He gulped. "I wouldn't do that to you. Not after everything you've been through."

Hermione frowned. "Well, you already brought a girl back here to spite me once. What's to stop you from doing it again?"

The back of Draco's throat went raw as she looked at him once more. "That was a mistake. I don't … I mean, I'm not …" He sighed again. "I'm not good at this, Hermione, but I … I like you, and I want you to be here."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat as she continued to gaze at him.

"There's not going to be anyone else. Be here."

"I … I guess I can make a point to -"

"No," he said while shaking his head. "Not good enough. Move in here."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Get all of your shit from the guestroom and move it in here. The clothes, the books, the bloody chocolate bar. All of it. I want it here. I want *you* here."

"Draco, that's … that's crazy."

"So? It all is, isn't it?"

Hermione let out a heavy sigh. She reached up and stroked his hair. "You're drunk."

"That has nothing to do with -"

"I'll tell you what, Draco. Ask me this again in the morning when you're sober. If you remember to do that, if you still feel the same way then I'll do it."

"You will?" he asked hopefully.

She gave him a faint smile and nodded. "If it's really what you want then yes."

Draco frowned. "No. It's not just about what I want. What do *you* want, Hermione?"

She sighed again and brought her hand to his cheek, running her thumb along his

soft skin. "I want you," she said simply, truthfully.

Draco leaned in and kissed her then. Softly. Sweetly. Affectionately. Gently massaging her lips with his, making her heart race and her palms sweat.

"Don't ever leave me," he breathed into her mouth before reclaiming it as his own.

Hermione did not answer, her heart suddenly feeling heavy as he continued to kiss her. She knew this was wrong. All of it. But she could not stop herself. Draco had become too special to her, too important, too … significant. She did not want to leave him but, at the same time, she knew she could not stay here forever. It had already been two months. Two incredible months that she would not trade for anything. But, someday soon, it would be time for her to go and she would have to leave Draco behind. All of him. It was the only way she was going to survive this.

When their kiss finally ended, Draco closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers. Hermione kept her eyes open, watching him closely as tears began to build behind her eyes.

"I'm going to make some tea," she said. "Would you like some?"

He nodded against her.

Hermione gave him one last soft kiss before reluctantly climbing out of his arms. She went into the kitchen for a moment and just stood there, bringing her hand to her mouth and trying to hold in the sobs. She knew getting involved with Draco was a mistake, but she had done it anyway. Because she was selfish. Because she wanted something that was hers. Because she wanted *someone* that was hers.

Hermione's eyes drifted over to Lucius's covered figure in the photo on the bookshelf. She still had not told him about his father. But how could she now? Despite everything, she did not want to lose him. And if he knew the truth … nothing would ever be the same. Draco would never look at her the same.

Sucking back all of her feelings for, yet, another night, Hermione went to work on making that tea. Just as she was finishing, the alarm on the fireplace went off and she ducked behind the counter, mugs in hand.

There was a 'swoosh', followed by the sound of someone humming. She smiled and stood back up.

"You're in bright spirits," she said, looking at Bronson. "Any particular reason?"

"Nope," he said with a wink.

"Don't tell me you and Theo -"

Bronson rolled his eyes. "Please. I was there for fifteen bloody minutes before I had to get back here for curfew. Did Malfoy tell you I was going to molest him or something?"

"No." She smiled wider. "It was just an observation from earlier. Thin walls, you know?"

"Well, I can assure you I didn't. Anything that might have happened in those fifteen minutes was completely mutual."

"What does that -?"

"I believe this is for you," said Bronson, tossing her a smooth, white stone. "Goodnight, Hermione." He winked one last time before heading out the door.

Hermione put the stone in her pocket. She smiled after him before heading back to Draco's room, tea in hand. When she got there, he was lying with his back turned to her. She walked over to him and could see that he was fast asleep.

After putting the mugs of tea on the nightstand, Hermione crouched down beside the bed and gazed at him, unable to stop herself from reaching out and moving some stray hairs from his eyes. She kissed him softly before climbing into the bed beside him. She pulled the comforter over them and wrapped her arms around his back, surprisingly happy to be the big spoon for once.

The next morning, Hermione was awoken with a kiss. She barely had time to open her eyes before Draco was picking her up and carrying her into his shower. They joked around while he lathered her up with the floral soap he kept in here for her, not once mentioning their conversation from the night before.

Even as he picked her up and shagged her against the shower wall, Hermione's mind was never far from his request, both anticipating and dreading that he would ask again.

While Draco got ready to leave, Hermione put on her robe and slippers, and headed to the kitchen to make him breakfast. He pulled her onto his lap as he ate, giving her a kiss on the cheek, nose, mouth between almost every bite.

And then it was time for him to leave. Hermione began to cleanup while he headed for the fireplace, freezing just beside his pot of Floo powder.

"Hermione, get over here," he said suddenly.

Hermione put down the dishes she was holding and walked over. Draco immediately pulled her into his arms and kissed her affectionately, one hand coming up to cup her cheek.

When he pulled away, he looked at her with his gray eyes and told her, "I meant what I said last night. I want you and all of your things in my room. Today. When I get back."

"O-okay." Her body quivered beneath him.

"You may have to do some rearranging in the dresser, but take whatever space you need. But keep our knickers separate. I hate it when people share a drawer for knickers."

Hermione smiled and nodded.

Draco leaned in and gave her one last kiss before Flooing to the Dark Lord's manor.

Hermione brought her thumb up to her mouth and bit onto it, staring hypnotically at the fireplace for a long while, a faint upturn still visible on her lips.

This was a mistake. She knew it was. Everything inside of Hermione told her that she would be regretting this later. That no good could come from her moving into his bedroom. But then … why could she not stop smiling?

# Chapter 13: Baby's in Black

**A/N: Ugh! Does everyone else forced to do Daylight Savings Time hate it as much as I do?! Three days into it and I'm still not adjusted :o(**

**So yeah, this is the last chapter I have completed, but I am still writing so no worries there! Hope y'all like it :o)**

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Draco sat in his usual spot next to Lord Voldemort, tapping his fingers impatiently as they waited for the last few Death Eaters to arrive. He could not help but notice Rodolphus on the other end of the table, skeptically eyeing his brother's empty chair. It had not escaped Draco's attention that Theo had mentioned his father was on Australia with Rabastan, and he was more than a little curious as to why they would take such a trip.

Theo was sitting across from him now, one seat over from Bellatrix. He was purposely avoiding Draco's eyes while a faint blush was visible on his cheeks, like he was ashamed of something. Merlin, Draco hoped he had nothing to be ashamed of. Hermione had mentioned Bronson Flooing into his living room just before midnight so, at least, he had not stayed over. But he also got the feeling by her smile that maybe something had happened. Though, he doubted Bronson would tell her about it, knowing how shy she got around such subjects. Probably just hinted.

Draco groaned. He supposed he should not care if Theo wanted to do … stuff with another man, but he really felt that was not the case. If Theo had done anything, it was because he was drunk off his arse and his judgment was off.

Draco probably should have just puked in the alley and gone with him anyway but, truthfully, he had not wanted to. He had wanted to get home to Hermione, even though he knew she would never shag him while he was that intoxicated. He just wanted to be with her, and that was becoming a serious problem. Even now, all he could think about was getting home to her, climbing into the bed they now shared and just holding her. Shagging would be great but he did not need it.

Draco gulped at this realization. *Shit.*

Finally, the door burst open and Quincy Nott scrambled in. Alone. Draco glanced behind him but there was no sign of Rabastan anywhere. Funny.

"Rabastan will not be joining us tonight," said Quincy, taking his seat just to the right of his son. One spot lower. Only then did Draco notice how he grimaced as he did so. Theo looked up just in time to see it too. He suddenly went very white.

Their meeting carried on as usual. Curfew was still intact, Marcus Flint was still missing, Draco had officially started sending Death Eaters out to search homes for Hermione, having them use *Obliviate* before they left so they could not warn others about these searches. Of course, no one had found her, because they were not searching Death Eaters' homes. As it was, no one even considered this as a possibility. Draco found great satisfaction in that.

Right near the end, just before Lord Voldemort was going to dismiss everyone, Quincy spoke up and requested his attention.

"My lord, Rabastan is waiting to hear back from me for the go-ahead. Should I let him know we have your consent?"

"Consent for what?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow.

"None of your fucking bus -"

"Rabastan and Quincy have gone ahead and located Potter's Mudblood's parents," answered Lord Voldemort. "They had previously discovered that she erased herself from their memories and sent them to start a new life in Australia. Clever witch for a Mudblood." He smiled almost fondly. It was creepy.

Draco noticed Rodolphus come to full attention at the other end of the table.

"Yes, and we have them in our sights, my lord," said Quincy, glancing skeptically at Rodolphus. For some reason, he must not have wanted him to know about this. "With your consent -"

"What do you want them for?" asked Draco, suddenly feeling very nervous. But he masked it well.

"To lure her back," answered Quincy. "Obviously."

"And you really believe she would be stupid enough to turn herself back in?" Draco scoffed. "She spent over four years in your homes and, undeniably, knows your tricks very well. I highly doubt she believes you will show her parents any mercy, even if she returns."

"I believe she would not risk it," said Quincy. "My lord, what is your verdict? Shall we proceed?"

Lord Voldemort folded his hands in front of him and said, "While I believe you wasted your time in searching for them in the first place, since they have already been located, I see no reason why we should not proceed. You may tell Rabastan

this but, first, I would like you to stay behind a moment, if you will."

"Certainly, my lord," said Quincy, smiling triumphantly in Draco's direction.

"Everyone else is dismissed."

Draco was the first out of his chair and quickly headed for the Floo. *Shit.* He needed to stop this. Hermione had already lost so much. She could not lose her parents too.

"Wait, Draco!" a voice called behind him, sounding even more distant than it probably was in his clouded ears.

Draco did not even bother to look back and see who it was. He got to the fireplace and grabbed a handful of Floo powder.

"Draco, stop!" Someone grabbed his shoulder and whipped him around. Theo. "I *need* to talk to you."

"Not now, Theo. I have somewhere I need to be."

"But it's important."

"Not. Now," he said through clenched teeth. He was wasting his time standing here.

"Then can I stop by your place later?"

"Not tonight," said Draco, tossing the Floo powder into the fireplace.

"Then when?"

"We'll figure it out later, Theo, but I fucking have to go!" He stepped into the green flames and said, "Leaky Cauldron."

Draco was quickly sucked away and landed a few moments later in the pub. He had only Flooed here for appearances and immediately headed out the backdoor, pressing the right brick to open up the path to Diagon Alley.

Draco walked with determination through the dark and desolate streets, remaining in the shadows and silently thanking Merlin that no one was around. He could not afford to be seen right now. Too much depended on his being discrete.

Draco did not stop, did not slow until he was at the abandoned shop he had never

once entered when it was open. Out of principle, most likely. Now that he had seen the inside, even in its current, dead state, he almost wished he had. There were a lot of things he would change about those times if he could.

Walking around to the back of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, Draco did the knock that *she* had created to signal an ally's arrival. Of course, the fact that he knew it only irked the others, but he did not have time to care.

The door opened a crack and a teenage boy poked his head out. "Oh. It's *you*," he said with disdain. "We weren't expecting you until next week. What do you -?"

"I need to speak with her," Draco interrupted.

"Why?"

"None of your fucking business. Now, let me in."

"Wait out there while I -"

"You seriously want me to stay standing in the bloody alley? Because, you know, if someone walks by, that won't be the least bit suspicious."

The boy huffed. "*Fine*. You can come in. But you can't go upstairs."

"I don't fucking care, just get her for me!" said Draco, pushing inside. "It's urgent!"

The boy muttered something under his breath and headed to the stairs on the other end of the back room.

"Walk a little faster, will you?" Draco called after him, already pacing around nervously.

Those fucking bastards. Those bloody*, fucking* bastards! How dare they go behind his back like this! He would fucking kill them! Bloody, *fucking* kill them!

"Draco?"

Draco was torn out of his daze, only then realizing that he had hit the wall, his knuckles now bleeding. *Shit.*

"Draco, what is it?" asked the woman rushing down the stairs. "Dennis said you seemed agitated. Is everything all right?" She hurried towards him, giving him that uneasy feeling as her face came into view. So close to Bellatrix's but, yet, so different. Softer. Kinder. "Do we need to prepare to leave?"

"No," he said quickly. "No, nothing like that."

Andromeda sighed in relief. "Then what -?"

"I need to cash in on that favor you owe me."

"Oh," she said in an even tone. "Already?"

"Yes," said Draco with a nod. "I need you to get a message to the resistance for me. *Immediately*."

"How do you expect -?"

"Don't play games. I *know* you have ways."

Andromeda frowned. "All right. What do you need?"

"It's about Hermione Granger's parents."

Her eyes widened with surprise.

"Word is that she altered their memories to be void of her and sent them to Australia," he said.

"I had heard something like that -"

"A pair of Death Eaters have located them. They only plan to capture them but, we both know, if that happens they will never again see the light of day."

"I see," Andromeda said heavily. "So what do you want -?"

"Inform the resistance," he demanded. "I don't know if they have anyone stationed in Australia but I didn't know where else to go with this."

Andromeda stared at him for a moment, eyebrows pursed and mouth slightly agape. "Mind if I ask why you are so eager to help Herm -?"

"You and I have already discussed that there would be no exchange of information while you're trapped here," he said. "The less you know the better."

She nodded. "I suppose you're right. Okay, Draco, I will let the resistance know and inform you next week of the outco -"

"I'm not going anywhere!" Draco shouted suddenly, this confession even taking him by surprise. He took a deep breath before adding, "I will wait until you have

more information."

"All right," said Andromeda before heading for the stairs.

"Andromeda."

She turned.

"Please, hurry."

Andromeda smiled softly before rushing back upstairs.

Draco began pacing again before finally settling against the wall. Unable to stop fidgeting, he looked into a box to his right and found an abundance of Extendable Ears. He pocketed a few for Hermione to pack in her bag because … well, you never know. On his other side, he found some Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. He hated the stuff ever since using it to help the bloody Death Eaters break into Hogwarts but, he had to admit, it came in handy. So he pocketed some of that too.

"Stealing, are you?"

Draco looked up to see Dennis standing on the staircase. He sneered at him before taking some Galleons out of his pocket and tossing them into the boxes.

"Andromeda wants you to come upstairs."

Draco smirked. "I thought you *forbade* me."

"I didn't say *I* wanted you up there, but she doesn't want you waiting down here alone and no one wants to volunteer to keep an eye on you."

"Seriously," said Draco, getting to his feet, "where's the fucking gratitude for keeping all your bloody arses alive?"

"I'll express my gratitude when you actually manage to get us all out of here without getting executed. Until then -"

"I'm working on it!" Draco snapped. "One bloody thing at a time." Besides, Hermione was first. These annoying gits would just have to wait.

Draco headed up the stairs, making sure to knock Dennis as he passed him. He remembered the little shit from Hogwarts. The younger brother of that annoying Potter groupie with the camera, and a Muggle-born. He had asked about his brother once, in a manner that was probably construed as rude, but Draco really

had not realized that he died in the war. If he had, perhaps he would have shown a bit more respect. Or just ignored the matter entirely. Yes, that sounded more like him.

Draco went straight over to the old, tattered sofa and took a seat, trying hard to ignore the three sets of curious eyes watching him from the table. Apparently, he had interrupted dinner.

It had been just over two years since Draco and Andromeda had created a rapport that worked in both of their favors. He had first seen her at the Black Market. Even though he had never met his aunt before, it was hard to miss her with features so strikingly similar to Bellatrix's.

Draco knew who she was immediately and, for some reason, found himself following her. Of course, she saw him and tried to slip away, assuming he wanted to arrest her for assisting the resistance.

But Draco knew none of that at the time. All he wanted to do was talk to her, to ask her questions about his mother's youth that his twisted Aunt Bellatrix would never answer.

Andromeda had ducked into an alley and pulled out her wand. She was just about to strike as Draco turned the corner. Only, she hesitated, and he was able to ask, "What was she like?"

The question was more than a little shocking for his aunt but, still, she answered, the two of them even going as far as grabbing a drink in a pub no Death Eater would dare enter. But he was safe there with her.

Of course, that pub was long gone now, cleared out as security rose in the city and more liberties were taken, but their relationship stuck. He would feed her information about the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters while, in turn, she would tell him where resistance members were stationed, ready to strike at any moment. He would send his Death Eaters to these places in hopes of killing them off. Bellatrix had been his primary target on several occasions but, somehow, she always escaped.

In retrospect, Draco realized that his and Andromeda's arrangement worked more in her favor than his, but the only thing she could really offer him was these deathtraps. Her information was useless to him.

Of course, Andromeda did not live in the city. That would have been suicide. But she came here often enough to pick up supplies for the resistance and, after their

trust had developed, Draco learned that she and other resistance members had created a makeshift home inside of an abandoned building in a dodgy part of town. It was unregistered, obviously, and the first thing Draco had done when Bellatrix pitched the idea for a curfew to catch Hermione was go there to warn her. It had not gone well.

Resistance members knew that Andromeda had an inside source that never led them astray, but no one knew who it was. So when Draco entered the unregistered residence and Dennis saw him, he immediately struck. Luckily, Andromeda heard the racket and came to his aid.

With his warning, they were able to get maybe half of the resistance members who had been staying there out of the city before the curfew was put in place, the half that had not seen him and Dennis dueling. The others were all still here, and it was just a coincidence that Draco even knew that Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes was still registered as a home, since the identical Weasleys whose names Draco could not recall lived here before the war. It had, somehow, slipped through the Ministry's fingertips, probably because it was also a business.

After telling Andromeda all of this, Draco had left, promising to visit every couple of weeks to bring them supplies until the curfew was lifted. Then he had gone outside, passed some dodgy pub and waited on the curb for the Knight Bus to come and take him home.

Only fate had bigger plans for Draco that night, and something was triggered in his memory when a girl beside him being hassled by a trio of arses cried out in pain. Hermione. It was because of his aunt that he was able to be in the right place at the right time for once in his life. And, for that, he was eternally grateful.

Suddenly, the door to the back room opened and Draco's eyes immediately shot over. Andromeda walked over to him with a young boy on her hand.

"Hi, Dwaco!"

Draco smiled. "Hello, Teddy. Sick of this place yet?"

"Never! I can't wait to tell Unky George I got to play wif all his toys!"

*George*! That was one of the names. And what was the other? Something as equally boring and oldmanish, if Draco remembered correctly.

"I suppose if a four-year-old has to be trapped somewhere, a joke shop is the place to be," said Draco, holding his hand out for the kid to slap. For some reason,

he always liked doing that.

"Hey, Dwaco, watch what I can do!" Suddenly, Teddy changed his nose into that of a pig's and started snorting.

Draco laughed. "So you can do more than just your hair now?"

"Uhuh! I have more! See -"

"Uh, Teddy, I'm sorry but Draco and I need to have a talk first. Why don't you go and sit with Cho for a minute? You can show him your other faces after."

Teddy pouted. "Oh, fine." He crinkled his cute little nose and walked over to the pretty Asian girl sitting at the table. She picked him up and put him on her lap, and he sat there, arms crossed as he gave everyone a sour look.

Andromeda sat on the sofa next to Draco and leaned in close to him. "As it turns out, there are resistance members stationed in Australia, and they have known of the location of the Grangers for a few years now. They are on their way to check on them now."

"Do they know to hurry?"

Andromeda smiled and gave him a shallow nod. "Yes, Draco. I let them know it was an urgent matter. Harry doesn't want anything happening to them any more than you do."

"So you spoke directly to Potter, then?" he asked.

Her smiled dropped. "No. Actually, I spoke to Ron, but when he got all panicky his sister, Ginny, took over."

Draco nodded.

"Draco … is there really nothing you can tell me about Hermione? Perhaps to give them a glimmer of hope -"

"No," Draco said sternly. "You can speculate all you want, but I won't give you a straight answer. You all are not the only ones at risk here."

"I understand," said Andromeda. "Hermione is very important to them. If they found out she was hiding somewhere, they would not hesitate to bombard the city."

"They would be hasty idiots," said Draco with a smirk.

"But, of course, one can only assume if the Death Eaters are going after her parents …"

"That she did something to bloody piss them off? All right. I'll give you that."

"I figured," said Andromeda. "But what I don't understand is where you fit into all of this."

"I have already explained this. I can't -"

"I know, I know. You can't tell me anything. Relax, Draco. I was simply thinking out loud." Andromeda smiled before standing back up. "I suppose I should go and wait on a response for you. It may be a while so I'm sure my comrades would be *glad* to fix you a plate if you would like one," she said, raising her voice and looking at all of them sternly. "After all, you're the one who brings us the majority of the food we eat."

"No thanks," said Draco. "I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself," she said. "Just let Cho know if you change your mind." Then she leaned in and fake-whispered, "She's the least hostile." Andromeda winked at him before heading into the backroom again and shutting the door.

As soon as she was gone, Teddy was off of Cho's lap and next to Draco on the sofa, sprouting a duck's beak and quacking to entertain him. He had barely been there a minute when Cho came and sat next to him, pulling him close every time he started to edge towards Draco.

Draco looked over Teddy's head at her and caught her eye for a split second before she turned away from him again. She might be kind of cute if she did not have that frigid look about her, not to mention having been tainted by Potter. But, then again, Hermione had been tainted by Weasel and that, very well, might have been worse. In fact, he was pretty sure it was. And, for some reason, he did not care. He wished he could be home with her right now. Instead of sitting next to this ungrateful bitch.

"Can you do a snake's tongue?" asked Draco in an attempt to humor the kid.

"Oh, yes!" Teddy said brightly before slithering one out of his mouth. "I can do somefing for all of Hogwurts houses." He then proceeded to do a lion's mane, an eagle's beak, and a badger's snout.

"Not bad," said Draco. "Any idea what house you want to be in?"

"Well, my daddy was a Gwyffindoe but my mommy was a Huffpuff."

"And don't forget your Aunt Cho was a Ravenclaw," said Cho while pulling him more onto her lap. Teddy fidgeted and moved back towards Draco.

"But your grandmother and first cousin *once removed* were both Slytherins," said Draco with a wink.

Cho huffed before making eye contact with one of the boy's sitting at the table. A former Gryffindor and their Quidditch captain when Draco first joined his house's team, if he remembered correctly. Though, his name escaped him. The boy and Cho exchanged an eye roll and Draco could not hold back his glower.

"Hey! My gwama said to be nice to Dwaco!" Teddy yelled at the boy, noticing the exchange.

"Sorry," he said. "Want a chocolate frog, Teddy?"

Well, that was one way to buy back a child's love.

"Yes, please," said Teddy, catching it when he tossed it over. "Thank you, Oliva."

*Oliver*! That was it!

Teddy opened the chocolate frog and bit off its head before it even had a chance to try and hop. He offered Draco the body, but he respectfully declined. Draco could not stomach much of anything right now. He was too nervous.

"I still don't understand why you're here," said Dennis, scowling at him from the table.

Draco did not answer.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!"

"Dennis, calm down," said a gentleman in his late thirties or early forties who Draco never knew. "Andromeda told you it was none of your concern. Just trust her judgment."

"How can I when there's a bloody Death Eater sitting on our sofa?"

"A Death Eater who's keeping your sorry arse alive," spat Draco. He knew he shouldn't bait him, but he was already stressed out and this boy's constant pestering was not helping.

Dennis was out of his chair and lunging at him in an instant, his wand held firmly in front of him. Draco did not even bother to reach for his. Andromeda trusted him and he would never jeopardize that. Dennis Creevey was hardly worth it.

But, as it turned out, Draco had no need to raise his wand, anyway, because Teddy swiftly jumped out of Cho's lap and into Draco's, blocking him from any attack the other boy might use.

"Put that bloody thing away," ordered Draco, moving Teddy out of the line of fire. "What the hell you trying to do, bringing that out with a bloody kid in the room?"

"Fuck you!"

Cho gasped and quickly threw her hands over Teddy's ears.

"I don't care what you do for us! I will *never* trust you! Death Eaters killed my brother!" shouted Dennis, the first traces of tears visible in his eyes.

"Yes, and they also killed my mother, turned my father into a piece of shi - garbage," corrected Draco, glancing sideways at Teddy, who was watching him with wide eyes, "and tortured me countless times before finally deciding I was worthy to be among them again. It's a bloody horrible initiation process, if you ask me."

"If all of that is true then why are you still one of them?" asked Dennis, his wand hand easing slightly.

"When the Dark Lord decides he wants you, you better bloody go along with it. Of course, there is always the alternative of being tortured until death. Or, worse, insanity."

"That's a coward's move," spat Dennis, finally lowering his wand.

"I've been called worse," said Draco. "You should be happy I'm such a coward. If I wasn't then you sure as hell wouldn't be here right now."

"The 'H' word isn't much better than the 'F' word," Cho muttered beside him.

"Sorry, kid," said Draco, ruffling Teddy's hair. "Probably best if you just ignore me from here on out."

Teddy frowned. "But I like you."

For some reason, Draco could not help but smile at that.

The older man stood up from his chair and walked over to Dennis, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Dennis, why don't you go and stick your head in the freezer. You're in immediate need of cooling off."

Dennis grunted and walked away. Draco had thought it was just a figure of speech, so he was a bit surprised when Dennis actually did go and stick his head in the freezer.

The older man followed his eyes and chuckled. "It's his process. Supposedly, he's done it ever since he was a kid." He turned back to Draco and said, "We've never properly met. Kennilworthy Whisp." He held out his hand. "But you can call me Kennil.

Draco took it, staring at him curiously while trying to place the familiar name. Then his eyes went wide. "You … you wrote *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Shouldn't you be older?"

"I don't know. Should I?" He looked at Cho, who shrugged. "So were you a Quidditch player in school, as well? Oliver, Cho and I love to have trivia nights to test our knowledge."

"*Love* is a strong word," said Oliver, who was trying to get Dennis out of the freezer.

"Anything to keep us from dying of boredom," added Cho.

Suddenly, Draco thought of something. While it had recently occurred to him - perhaps with a little goading from Bronson - that he should be trying harder to make Hermione more comfortable, he supposed he should also be doing the same for these people. "Do you all need me to bring you anything to entertain yourselves? I suppose the knickknacks downstairs can only do it for so long."

Everyone gasped at this.

"What?" asked Draco, pursing his eyebrows. "I can be nice." And why did everyone keep reacting that way when he was?

"Creepy," said Dennis, whose head was now poking out of the freezer.

"Fu -" Draco glanced at Teddy. *Oh*, he really had to hold his tongue for this one.

"Quick! We must utilize this miracle!" shouted Kennil. "Oliver, get some parchment and one of those never-run-out-of-ink quills!"

"Self-Inking," corrected Cho.

Kennil, Oliver and Cho immediately went to work on writing a list of things they needed. Well, wanted, really. They had everything they *needed*. Dennis refused to be any part of it, but the others did add a few things onto their list that they knew he would like.

"You all *do* sneak out of here from time to time to, at least, go to the Black Market, don't you?" asked Draco, once he realized their list filled up an entire page.

"Yes, but we try to keep our visits minimal," said Cho.

"*And* we're running low on the Galleons," said Kennil, rubbing his fingers together.

"Oh." Draco reached into his pocket and pulled out his pouch of money. "Take it," he said, handing it to Kennil.

"Oh, no," said Kennil, trying to hand it back. "We couldn't possibly -"

"Yes, we can," said Oliver, plucking the pouch out of his hands. "Andromeda has been wanting to ask but didn't know how to bring it up. I'll make sure to count it so we can pay you back every Sickel when this is over."

"That won't be necessary," said Draco. "Money isn't exactly an issue for me. Think of it as an early Christmas gift."

"Oh, Merlin, I hope we're not still stuck here for Christmas," said Cho, hugging onto Teddy, who was back on her lap.

While the others all agreed, Draco secretly hoped that they would be. If they were still here then that meant Hermione would still be at his place, and that sounded just fine to him.

Once their list was finished, they somehow got to talking about Quidditch games they played at Hogwarts. Cho and Draco immediately began a dispute about who caught the Snitch in his third and her fourth year.

"You're wrong, Chang. You caught the Snitch during our match the year before. You know, when I was just a little second year with big eyes, playing Quidditch on a real pitch for the first time."

"Actually, that would have been your second time," corrected Oliver. "Your first Quidditch game was against Gryffindor. Surely you recall Harry catching the Snitch just moments after it was lingering near your ear." He smirked.

"No, I don't recall that," said Draco.

"I still say I caught the Snitch in my fourth year," said Cho.

"You really didn't."

"I really did."

"Actually, you didn't," said Oliver.

Cho whipped her head towards him and narrowed her eyes.

"Sorry, Cho, but I was at that game, scoping out the competition. You know my memory when it comes to Quidditch. He caught it maybe forty minutes in, and Slytherin was already in the lead by a good one-hundred points."

"Ah, sweet, sweet victory," said Draco with a smirk.

Just then, the door to the backroom opened and Draco shot up from the sofa. Andromeda stepped out, her legs unsteady and her expression weary as she caught the eyes of her nephew.

"What has happened?" he asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Andromeda sighed heavily. "Draco, come back here, please. There is something I need to tell you."

Without hesitation, Draco marched forward, passed Andromeda and went into the room. She glanced around at everyone's worried expressions before gulping and following him in. The door shut behind her.

Barely a minute later, the door burst back open and Draco came barreling out.

"Draco, wait!" shouted Andromeda while running after him. "I'm sorry! They tried! They really did!"

"No! You don't fucking get it!" shouted Draco, whipping back around just before he got to the stairs. "That's not … they weren't …" He gulped. "Their plan was *only* to capture them. I made this worse by coming here!"

"No, you didn't. Being held prisoner by those people … *that* would have been worse."

"Yes, well, I'm sure their daughter would disagree."

And with that, he turned back towards the stairs and charged down them, not slowing until he was out the door and on the street.

Draco knew he should not have turned onto Diagon Alley so hastily, but he had to get out of there. He was just lucky no one was around. Heading back the way he came, Draco mindlessly headed into the Leaky Cauldron, walked right past the fireplace, and out the front door. For the first time in weeks, he dreaded going home. He was not ready to see Hermione, only to have to break her heart.

So Draco walked. For hours, he wandered through the desolate streets of London. How had he never realized how eerie it was before? On a few rare occasions before the war, he had had to venture the Muggle streets of the city, and they had always been so alive, bustling with activity as everyone hurried to get from one place to another without any sort of magical means. Where were all of those people now? In hiding? Imprisoned? Dead?

So many Muggles had lost their lives here the day Lord Voldemort had decided to take over. Draco was just happy that, at the time, he was still being punished for his failures during the war, and was too badly injured after countless hours of torture to partake in that takeover.

But he had seen the wreckage after. He even had to help clear the bodies littering the streets, and that was the worst part. The putrid smell, the cold feel of their skin, the looks of horror permanently etched on their faces as magic, something they had always believed to be a fantasy, stole their lives.

Draco hated death. Which was, perhaps, why he was so afraid of it. He did not want to end up like those bodies. Just a cold, dead mess left behind while their world was brought to ruins.

No. Draco could not die. Not yet. Not until he knew he had done something worth dying for. Like saving Hermione. Getting her back to the people she loves.

Draco did not find his way to his building until just before curfew. He headed inside and up the stairs in a mindless wander, not stopping until he was at the door to his flat. He took a deep breath as he leaned his head against the door. It was not until he heard the warning alarm for curfew that he finally unlocked it and went inside, slipping off his shoes, hanging his cloak, using both the Muggle locks and his wand to keep everyone out.

Then he headed for his room. He could see the faint light shining from underneath his door. When he opened it, Hermione's head shot up to look at him. She had been sitting huddled on the bed, fidgeting nervously while listening closely to the

static on her radio. Her routine every time he was late.

Hermione let out a breath of relief and scrambled off the bed, running to him on unsteady legs and pulling him into a warm embrace. "Where were you?" she asked into his chest. "You had me so worried."

"Hermione …"

"What is it?" She pulled her head away and looked into his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Hermione, I …" Draco just couldn't get the words out, not when she was looking at him with those beautiful amber irises. How was he supposed to start a conversation like this? One that would, undoubtedly, bring tears to the eyes he loved so much. There was nothing Draco hated more than seeing Hermione cry.

"Draco, you're scaring me. Please … tell me what's wrong."

"Hermione, something has happened … to someone."

Hermione went white. "Harry?"

"No." Draco shook his head. "No, not Harry, not Ron, none of them."

"Then who?"

Just then, the static of the radio became louder, and then it sounded more like shuffling. There was some heavy breathing before someone finally said, "*Hermione*."

Draco cringed. Weasley.

"*If you're out there, if you're listening, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry I failed you. I tried to get there but I couldn't before it all went down. I …*" His voice trailed off as the sound of sobbing filled the airwaves.

There was some more shuffling before a female voice came on. Ginny. "*We would like to take this time to report a great loss tonight in Australia. Despite the resistances best efforts, we were unable to -*"

Draco ran over to the radio and switched it off. Hermione did not deserve to find out like this. She needed to hear it from him.

"Australia?" repeated Hermione as he looked back at her. "But that's … No." She shook her head frantically. "No, that's impossible. I erased myself from their -"

"Rabastan and Quincy found out you sent your parents there."

Hermione's head stopped shaking, her eyes drawing slowly towards his. "But … how?"

"I don't know the circumstances behind it, but Theo had mentioned to me that his father was in Australia a couple of days ago. He came back today and asked the Dark Lord for permission to abduct your parents. They thought it would lure you back into their clutches."

"So … my parents have been abducted?" asked Hermione, sounding unsure if she should be hopeful or horrified.

Draco sighed and shook his head. "No. I have a … I suppose it's a connection to the resistance, and I had my source inform them of the plan. They have members stationed there, and they were already aware of your parents' location."

"I don't understand," she said, trying to hold in the tears that were fogging her eyes. "If the resistance got to my parents and they weren't abducted then … then why is Ron sorry?"

Draco said nothing as he looked shamefully to the ground.

"Draco, please … Please, tell me what happened."

He looked up just as the first tear escaped her left eye, and then another fell from her right. He could feel his own tears stinging behind his, his throat growing raw at the very sight of her distress. He hated this, but he had to tell her. She needed to know.

"Rabastan showed up before they had a chance to get them out. Your parents didn't remember you, so they had to return what you erased before they would cooperate. A duel began and … and your father got hit in the crossfire. He's …" Draco trailed off, gulped, and started again. "He's dead."

Two streams of tears were now dripping down Hermione's cheeks and onto the floor. She wiped them and asked, "And … and my mom?"

"They got her out. The resistance is moving her and they plan to keep her in hiding until … until all of this is over."

Hermione looked down to the ground, her face distorting in horrible pain as the tears continued to pour from her eyes.

Draco took a step closer. "Hermione …" And then another. "Hermione, I … I'm so sorry. I tried. I really did."

"I know," she choked out, her eyes clenching shut as she continued to cry. "This … I-it's better. It would have been …" *hiccup* … "horrible for them if they were caught. I just … I hadn't …" She choked … "seen my father in … over five years. I … I don't …"

Draco reached Hermione just as her legs gave way and she began to collapse to the floor. He took her into his arms and fell with her, moving her hair out of her face so it would not stick to her wet cheeks. Hermione wept into his chest, clinging strongly to his jumper while he continued to stroke her soothingly.

"Draco … why …? Why do they …" *hiccup* … "keep hurting me?"

"I don't know," he said before kissing the top of her head. "They're sick."

"I hate them," said Hermione, nuzzling deeper into his chest.

Draco gulped. "Me too."

And he meant it. Up until this moment, Draco had been lenient with his fellow Death Eaters, but any connection he still felt towards them was officially severed. There would be no more mercy. They would pay. Each and every Death Eater who ever hurt Hermione would pay.

For hours, Draco sat on the floor, letting Hermione cry into him. When her sobs finally started to die, he lifted her weak body and carried her onto the bed, letting her keep her arms wrapped tightly around him while he lied down next to her.

Draco did not fall asleep that night. He was too focused on the girl he was holding in his arms to even consider leaving this present moment. More than anything, Draco wanted to be here for Hermione. Never in his life had he cared for someone so deeply. Any great loss she felt might as well have been his own.

It was then that he finally grasped it. The reason Hermione's father's death - a Muggle he had never known and probably wouldn't have liked - had hurt him so terribly, even going as far as making him feel like he had lost his own mother again, was because of this girl. In his arms. Who he more than liked. More than cared for. Who felt so perfect and warm against him, and whose face he looked forward to seeing every morning when he woke up and every evening when he got home. He loved her.

Draco gulped at the realization. It was true. He knew it was. He loved Hermione Granger. It made absolutely no sense, but that was the beauty of it. She was wrong for him in every way, but he didn't care. Everything he did from this point forward would be for her. Because she made him feel something for the first time in over four years. Before Hermione had come back into his life, Draco had been numb, having shut himself off entirely from any sort of emotions. It was the only way he had been able to survive. Much like her.

Now that she was seeped into him, he had no intention of ever letting her go. Not until the day they would be forced to part. And, on that day, he would end it, taking as many of those filthy bastards with him as he could.

"Draco …" said a faint voice muffled against his chest.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for … for being here with me. I honestly don't know what I'd do without you."

Draco moved her head out of his jumper and leaned in to kiss her. "The feeling is mutual."

Hermione smiled weakly. She kissed him again before sinking back into his chest, knowing very well that there was nowhere in the world she would rather be right now. Draco was officially all she knew, all she needed, and her inevitable flee from his presence was becoming harder and harder to process. Without him, she would have never been able to get through this night. Without him, she might not make it through another day.

Hermione knew what this feeling was, but she was not ready to admit it to herself. She needed time. More time with Draco. Unfortunately for both of them, time was officially running out.

# Chapter 14: With A Little Help From My Friends

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Hermione shot spell after spell at Bronson, not caring that she was knocking him, stinging him, bruising him, making him bleed. But he had told her it was all right. Because he understood that she needed to let off some steam. And then they would just practice her Healing Charms after. If she was up for it, that is.

Bronson slammed against the wall of the basement particularly hard when Hermione hit him with a spell so powerful, even when he successfully blocked it he still managed to crack the stone.

Panting heavily he held his hand up in defeat. "Pause, please," he said. "I need a breather."

Hermione lowered her wand and hung her head in shame. "Sorry," she said. "I let myself lose control again."

"S'alright," he said. "I told you that you could. It makes sense that your mind's not focused right now."

"But this is a war, Bronson. People die on the battlefield all the time. I can't afford to lose control when I see one of my friends go down. It only takes a moment of hesitation for things to go terribly wrong."

"Yes, but when you lose control you beat the shit out of me. Aim that at the right person and you're golden."

Hermione nodded, tears beginning to fall from her eyes. Her shoulders bobbed as she tried to hold in her whimper.

Bronson sighed. "I don't know why you try to hold it in. Your father was murdered, Hermione. It's only natural to cry a little."

"I've cried a lot," she said, wiping at her eyes. "I just want it to stop already."

"When's Draco getting home?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know. He said he had to go out of the city today so we'll be lucky if he gets back tonight at all."

Bronson sighed again. He stood up from where he had landed on the ground and limped over to her. He could not believe that Draco had the nerve to go out of London when it had only been two days since Hermione lost her father. She needed him right now and, as much as Bronson wanted to help, he was not a very good substitution. When he reached Hermione, he pulled her into him and let her cry into his shoulder.

"If he doesn't get back before curfew, do you want me to stay up there with you?"

He could feel her nod against him. "I wish I could see my mother," she said suddenly. "To make sure she's all right."

"I know," he said while rubbing soothing circles along her back, "but that would be too dangerous. You want to keep her safe, remember?"

She nodded. "I just miss her. I miss everyone."

"Then don't you think it's time you came up with a plan to get out of here?"

Hermione froze against him.

"It's obvious that the curfew isn't being lifted anytime soon. It might never. So isn't it time you found some other way to escape the city? It's not impossible, especially since you're just one person."

She remained silent.

"Hermione … you still *want* to leave, don't you?"

Nothing.

"Say something."

"I … I want to leave, Bronson. I want to see Harry and Ron and Ginny and everyone else, but … but I don't want to leave Draco here. I already can't breathe when he gets home late, what's it going to be like if we're separated?"

Bronson pulled back so he could look at her. "So … what? You're just going to stay here forever because you don't want to be worried about Malfoy?"

"No, of course not," she said. "I just … I don't want to leave him behind."

Bronson bit his cheek. "You want him to come with you." It was not a question.

Hermione blushed as she cast her eyes to the floor.

"Hermione … you know he'll never go for it. Besides, you're planning to look for the headquarters of the resistance. Sending him into their hive, even on the arm of Harry Potter's best friend is still suicide. Surely, you realize -"

"Bronson, I know!" she shouted while turning red in the face. "I'm not an idiot! But he can't stay here! A bunch of Death Eaters already have it out for him!"

"But he can't leave. Staying is his best option."

"No, it's not!" Hermione pulled away from him and turned so she was facing the other direction, bringing her hand up to wipe her tears away before any more could fall.

Bronson frowned. "Hermione, I'm sorry. But you need to be realistic here. Malfoy will *never* be able to escape You-Know-Who. Not until one of them is dead."

"I do know that," she said after a small pause, her heart feeling incredibly heavy. "But, it's just …" She sighed. "I've already lost so much. I don't want to lose him too."

"I know," he said, coming up and hugging her from behind. "But just because you have to separate doesn't mean you're going to lose him. There's still a chance you'll both survive this. If you can get Harry Potter out of hiding and to start a battle against that deformed bastard then you can sure as hell bet that Malfoy won't be fighting on his side. Just tell your friends not to attack him."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I'm sure that will go over *really* well with Harry and Ron."

She suddenly felt Bronson's arms tense around her. "Hermione, you're not … I mean, you and … and Ron. Are you still planning on going back to him?"

Hermione's smile faded. "I … don't know."

"Have you thought about it?"

"Of course I have," she said. "Every day I think about it. But I haven't seen Ron in four and a half years." She sighed. "How am I supposed to know if those feelings are still there?"

"Well, then ask yourself this. When you first found out about your father, who did

you want there with you? Draco or Ron?"

That was simple. "I wanted Draco."

"Then shouldn't that be your answer?"

Hermione sighed again. "I don't know."

She knew it should be simple. Draco was the one she wanted, the one she desired, the one she thought about constantly, but Ron … he was her past, her longtime crush, one of her last ties to the life she once had and missed terribly, and she had always thought he was going to be her future. But now there was Draco. And a future without him just seemed so …bleak.

XXX

Draco walked through the small, two-story house in a trance, unsure of why he had come here and what he was looking for. He headed up the stairs and began searching doors until he came to a bedroom belonging to a teenage girl. He smiled.

The room was not cluttered with tacky posters or a collage of photos like most teenage girls would have. No, this room was more … sophisticated. There were shelves all along the walls filled with books, the majority with titles he did not recognize. Most likely Muggle authors. The bed was neatly made, even though it had not been touched in years, the desk was well-organized and the closet was color coordinated. Not one object was out of place.

Draco found himself drawn over to the desk, where a single framed photo stood. He picked it up and stared at the smiling faces of Harry, Ron and Hermione. Probably in their first year, by the looks of it. He sighed before slipping it into his bag. She would want that.

After grabbing a few of the books that looked the most worn off of the shelves, Draco went over to the bed and sat down, stroking the comforter as he tried to feel a part of Hermione here. This was her room, her house, her life before the war. This was where she came when she needed comfort or wanted to be alone. Her safe place. And she had not seen it in years.

Draco sighed.

He then opened the small drawer near the nightstand, curious to see what she kept here. There were several bookmarks, a flashlight, a box of some gummy candy that was probably horribly stale, some strange devise that seemed to work

like a quill, and a journal. Draco picked this last item up and flipped through the pages. He knew he shouldn't invade Hermione's privacy like this, but maybe just one entry wouldn't hurt … He opened to one of the last pages with writing, one paragraph popping out at him.

*I am not sure what to do about my growing feelings for Ron, especially now that Lavender is out of the picture. Good riddance. The two of us have been best friends for so many years now, and I think we are both afraid to cross that line, but, somehow, I just know that we have to. Ron and I are meant to be more than friends, I am sure of it. Because the love I feel for him, it's different than the love I feel for Harry. I hate to make a confession like this on paper, but I truly believe that I am in love with Ro -*

Draco slammed the journal shut. Well, that was enough of that. He put it back in the nightstand and shut the drawer.

Standing up from the bed, Draco took one last look around the room before heading for the door. He was not ready to leave yet, but he knew he had to. Hermione was still very upset about her father and he did not want to leave her alone for longer than necessary, as much as he wanted to stay and learn more about her life before …

Draco gulped. He left the room and quietly shut the door behind him. Just before he reached the staircase, he heard the floorboards creak in the living room on the first floor. He froze, listening closely. Footsteps. He swiftly moved against the wall and hid himself in the shadows.

When whoever was down there stopped walking, Draco slowly began to descend the staircase, one quiet step at a time, his wand in his hand and his ears on full alert in case of any more movement.

When Draco reached the bottom of the stairs, he moved himself so he could just see through the archway leading to the living room. Someone was standing in there, their back to him while they stared at some photos on the wall. Hermione was vacant in all of them. Part of her spell to erase herself, Draco was sure. This person waved their wand and Hermione slowly began to return to each photo. The figure reached out and touched one of her in her teen years before turning and glancing around the room.

Draco's breath hitched. *Rodolphus.*

His hand clutched tightly to his wand as he glared at this man. While he may not have been involved with Hermione's father's death, he was still high on the list of

Death Eaters Draco wanted to dispose of. For owning her. For raping her. But mostly for loving her, if you could even call it that. Rodolphus' feelings for Hermione were sick, to say the least. He did not just want to capture and execute her like the others. He wanted to possess her. And that, to Draco, was so much worse.

It suddenly dawned on Draco that, if he wanted to get rid of Rodolphus, this was the place to do it. No one knew he was here, and he doubted anyone knew Rodolphus was here. How hard would it be to just make him disappear?

Draco gripped his wand tighter and started to take a step forward. It was almost too easy. He lifted his arm, aimed, and -

The front door clicked open and Draco darted around the side of the stairs, poking his head out just enough to see Rabastan walk into the house. *Shit.*

Rabastan walked towards the living room. "I knew you'd be here."

Rodolphus said nothing. Draco went around the other side to get a better look, and found him glaring at his brother, fists clenched as angry tears flooded his eyes.

"Oh, just get on with it, will you? I really don't have time for all of this pathetic nonsense."

Rodolphus brought his wand up to his throat and said, "*You knew.* You knew I promised her years ago that her family would never be hurt. How could you -?"

"How could I *what*? Try to move this damn process along so that you can finally get what you want? All you said was that you wanted her back. Who cares what means I use to get that for you?"

"I do," said Rodolphus through clenched teeth. "Her family is OFF limits."

"Well, it doesn't exactly matter now, does it? Her father is dead and her mother is long gone. It's over, not to mention a bloody waste of time."

"Fuck you -"

"Oh, will you quit your bloody whining already!" shouted Rabastan, stepping further into the room so Draco could get a better look at him. His face was bright red as he stared at his brother with narrowed eyes. "She's a fucking Mudblood! A slave! She is worthless and so is her family! Just a filthy, revolting -"

"HOW DARE YOU!" Rodolphus took his wand off of his throat and aimed it at Rabastan.

"How dare I what? Speak the truth? She doesn't care about you, Brother! She never did! That's why she slit your fucking throat open and left you for dead!" Rabastan took several deep breaths. "When we find her, she is going to loathe you even more than she already does," he said in a calm voice. "What's to stop her from trying to kill you again? And maybe, this time, she'll succeed. Sometimes I think she would be doing me a favor."

Rodolphus lowered his wand but continued to stare coldly at his brother, his angry tears now dripping down his cheeks.

"When we find her, I will let you have her once more. *Once more*, Rodolphus. That is all you get before I take a bloody knife to her throat, and I'll make damn sure there is no chance of survival for her. Maybe then you will get back to your old self and stop being so bloody pathetic over a Mudblood." He sneered. "Now, come along. I do not want to waste another minute in this filthy place."

Rabastan turned and walked out of the room. Draco noticed Rodolphus slip a smaller frame into his pocket before following his brother out. While Draco desperately wanted to attack, using the Killing Curse on both of their bloody arses, he knew now was not the time. Two on one was too risky, and Draco could not afford any suicide missions. Not until Hermione was out of his flat and somewhere safe.

Draco went over to the window and pulled the curtains back a crack, just enough so he could see Rabastan and Rodolphus take off on their brooms. He was glad he had thought to put his own broom around the side of the house, just in case something like this was to happen.

With a faint growl over missed opportunity, Draco put his wand back in his pocket and went over to look at the photos on the wall Rodolphus had been staring at. They were all of Hermione at various stages of growing up, many also including her parents. There was one close-up of just her where her two large front teeth were poking out of her wide smile that he was particularly fond of, but he doubted Hermione would want that one, so he grabbed one of her and her parents when she was around twelve instead.

Looking around the rest of the house, Draco wished he knew what was sentimental and what was not, but he really did not have a clue. Part of him ached to know this piece of her life, but that same part of him understood that he probably never would. Even if Voldemort was defeated, Hermione's life would

never be the same. She had lost her father, her confidence, her innocence. All things she could never get back, at least entirely. Chances are she would not even want to return to this home she and her parents had once shared. It held too many memories of the life that was stolen from her at such a young age.

Draco sighed and took one last look at the photos on the wall before heading for the door. He needed to get back to London before the curfew began. Hermione still needed him, and he would be damned before he let her down again.

<p style="text-align: center;">XXX</p>

While practicing Healing Charms, Hermione and Bronson lost track of time. They did not realize how late it was until they heard the door to the building open, signaling Quigley's return from work.

"Shit," said Bronson, standing up and walking over to the stairs leading out of the basement. "I really wish he and that broad never broke up. It was so bloody convenient before."

"It's fine," said Hermione, walking up beside him. "Just head inside and tell him you went for a walk or something, and I'll slip upstairs."

Bronson nodded. "I'll make up some excuse and head up there in a little bit. I think he thinks Malfoy and I are shagging or something, since I've been up there so bloody often lately." He winked.

Hermione could not help but smile.

The two of them slowly headed up the stairs together, Bronson taking the lead and listening closely for any signs of his flatmate.

When they got to the second floor, Bronson held his hand out for Hermione to stop. "Someone else is here," he said, suddenly looking worried. "Go back to the basement, Hermi -"

"No," she said, stubbornly crossing her arms. "I'll wait right here until I know everything is all right."

Bronson wanted to argue, but Quigley's voice was becoming more urgent. He nodded before heading up the last flight of stairs to his flat's door. It was currently wide open, Quigley standing in the archway and yelling at someone on the inside.

Bronson walked over cautiously and put a hand on his flatmate's shoulder.

Quigley jumped and turned, letting out a sigh of relief when he saw who it was. "Where the fuck you been? This arse says he's been waiting for you. In-fucking-side!"

Bronson looked past him, unsure if he should be happy or worried when he saw Theo stand up from his sofa. The result of his mixed emotions was a strange, straight smile that was probably as unsettling to witness as it was to make.

"Theo. Do what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Where the fuck is Draco?" Theo asked bluntly.

Bronson shrugged. "Hell if I know."

"Then where's that fucking stone I leant you?"

"Umm … I gave it to Malfoy." Not a complete lie.

"And you really have no fucking idea where he is?"

"Nope."

Theo huffed. "I don't believe you. He's avoiding me. Has been for days. Why the *fuck* is he avoiding me?"

"Dunno," said Bronson, shrugging again. "Malfoy and I hardly sit around chatting about our feelings."

"I thought that's what fucking pansies like you were for," said Theo with a sneer.

Bronson smirked. "Ouch, Theo. And after everything I did for -"

Theo's eyes went wide as he shouted, "Just tell me where the fuck he is!"

"Why do you care?" asked Bronson, stepping further into his apartment. Quigley was still frozen in the doorway.

"Because I need to fucking talk to him! *Now*!"

"Then go wait in *his* flat, because he certainly isn't going to come down here. I just gave him a new pack of cigarettes this morning."

"*Tell me* where he is."

"I. Don't. Know."

Theo's nostrils flared. "You think I don't know what's going on here? Any help you give him is cause for immediate execution!"

Bronson raised his eyebrows. "You're going to have me executed, Theo?"

"Not if you cooperate. Now, give me your fucking wand. Both of you."

Quigley was taken aback. "Excuse me? What right do you have -?"

"Every fucking right!" shouted Theo, pulling back his sleeve so Quigley could see his Dark Mark. "Now, *give me* your *fucking* wands!"

"B-but Malfoy is always the one to check our wands," said Quigley turning as white as a sheet.

"Not today he isn't. Hand them over." He held out his hand and wiggled his fingers impatiently.

Quigley grunted before handing his over, but Bronson hesitated a moment longer. He had just been helping Hermione in the basement, blocking spells and casting charms as he always did, because Malfoy was the one to check his wand's activity every day. But now … there was no hiding this.

"I'm waiting," said Theo, still holding his hand out towards Bronson. He slowly handed it over.

Theo checked the last few spells on Quigley's wand first. There was nothing abnormal, of course. He was not the one helping a fugitive practice their magic for a war in the basement.

When Theo lifted Bronson's wand, he was not blind to the way the other wizard took a step back.

"Do you want to tell me anything before I look at this, Bronson?"

"Nope," he said, grunting as he looked towards the door. Merlin, he hoped Hermione had returned to the basement.

Theo checked the wand. Healing Charm. Healing Charm. "Get into a brawl recently?"

Bronson shrugged.

Theo kept looking, noticing all of the defensive spells and a few offensive ones as

well. He lowered the wand. "What the fuck have you been doing?"

Another shrug. Bronson was all the way back against the wall now. With his peripherals, he could see Quigley staring oddly at him.

"You better fucking answer me, Bronson!"

"Or what?" he said, crossing his arms. "You obviously came here for a reason, Theo, so why don't you stop wasting all of our time and just tell me what it is you want."

"I want the fucking truth!"

"The truth about what?"

"About what you and Draco are hiding! And maybe him!" He motioned towards Quigley. "I don't know! I honestly didn't know he fucking existed until he walked through the door!"

"Ah … Ow," said Quigley while frowning.

"What do you *think* we're hiding?"

"Is this about you and Malfoy being lovers?" asked Quigley before Theo could answer. "Because, I have to be honest, I have been suspecting it for quite some time."

Theo rolled his eyes. "Fuck. No. This is about *you* and what you said." He was looking at Bronson. "I may have been drunk off my arse but I know what I heard!"

Bronson gulped. Oh boy. "And what was that?"

"I want *you* to tell me!"

"I don't know what you're -"

"FUCKING LIAR!" Theo lifted his own wand and aimed it at Bronson, hitting him with a spell that chained his wrists and ankles. "Tell me now or I'll take you and your fucking wand in!"

"WHOA!" shouted Quigley, holding up his hands and walking towards his friend. "I think we all just need to calm -"

"FUCK YOU!" shouted Theo, doing the same to him. Quigley let out a high-pitched

squeal.

"Theo, what the fuck are you doing?" shouted Bronson, trying to walk forward, but Theo moved his wand back to him and he quickly stopped. "I don't know what it is you want!"

"The fucking truth!"

"About what?"

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!" Quigley repeated frantically.

"You *know*!"

"No, I fucking don't! What is this about, Theo?"

"Just tell me!"

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me about fucking -"

Just then, Hermione stepped through the door, wand aimed at Theo.

His eyes went wide. "- Granger!"

Before he had a chance to react, she sent him shooting backwards into the wall, his, Quigley's and Bronson's wands flying out of his hands and smoothly into hers. When Theo tried to get to his feet, Hermione levitated him, putting him down in the closest chair and binding him to it. All the while, Quigley was screaming like a little girl.

"Holy fuck! What is going on?" he shouted as Bronson hopped over to slam the door shut.

"I knew it!" shouted Theo, struggling against his binds. "I fucking knew I heard you say her name!"

Hermione's jaw dropped. "You said my name, Bronson?" she asked, her head whipping in his direction.

His cheeks flushed. "Not all of it. Only the first half."

"Yes, and how many fucking Hermi's do *you* know!" spat Theo, still trying to break free.

"Unbelievable," she said, rolling her eyes.

Hermione went over and used her wand to take the chains off of Bronson and Quigley. Then she gave Bronson his wand back but held on to Quigley's. It was still too soon for her to know if she could trust him.

"I can't believe you fucking came in here," said Bronson, breathing heavily through his nose.

"He was *going* to arrest you."

"He was bluffing."

"No, I wasn't!"

Bronson glanced at Theo before looking back at Hermione. He smirked. "Yes, he was."

"Holy fuck! HOLY FUCK, BRONSON!" shouted Quigley, pacing frantically around the room. "What have you done? What are you doing? This … this is fucking Hermione Granger!"

"Yes, I know," said Bronson, following his flatmate's chaotic movement before finally settling his eyes back on Theo, hair askew, cheeks flushed, and clothes rumpled. Still pissed but obviously given up on getting out of his binds. They were solid. "So what are we going to do with him?"

"I don't know," said Hermione, turning to look at him. "Memory-Erasing Charm?"

"*Don't you dare!*" said Theo in a commanding voice.

"But it's been a long time since I've done one and, since my mind still isn't up to par, I don't know how successful it will be."

"But your magic has already improved drastically," said Bronson while giving the top of her head a pat. They both ignored Quigley as he continued to pace in a panic around them.

"Well, I suppose I can give it a try," she said, taking several steps towards Theo and holding out her wand.

He screamed. "There is no way in hell I am going to let a mental witch mess with my memories!"

"I am not mental!" she shouted, kicking him in the shin. "Now, hold still!"

Theo struggled harder as Quigley walked in circles, muttering to himself about what deep shit they were in. Hermione closed her eyes and tried to concentrate, but there was just too much going on.

"Bronson, could you please keep him quiet!" she shouted, pointing her wand at Quigley. "Don't make me use a Stunning Charm on you!"

He shrieked and froze. "Oh god, oh god, oh god!" Quigley ran into one of the bedrooms and proceeded to scream in there. Bronson followed him in, but the noise wasn't any less.

Hermione's head began to ache as she re-aimed her wand at Theo. *Damn*. There was no way she could do this with all of this noise. She brought her hand up and rubbed her temple.

Theo smirked. "Malfoy said once that your mind had been completely fucked. While he may have been exaggerating, it seems he wasn't so far off."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "My mind is fine," she said. "It's all of this damn noise that's the problem!" And with that, Hermione waved her wand and cast a Silencing Charm on Theo. Unfortunately, he wasn't the noisemaker driving her absolutely insane. "Wait here," she said with a frustrated huff before following Bronson and Quigley into the bedroom.

Theo started to say, "Where the fuck else am I going to go?" but stopped when he realized his attempt would be wasted.

Outside of the front door, Draco had just been running by to get to his own flat when he heard all of the yelling. That was odd. He put his broom down in the hallway and took out his wand, cautiously opening the door to Bronson and Quigley's flat. He froze when he saw Theo sitting there, bound and silent, but his eyes doing enough talking as they attempted to burn a hole right through him.

Draco stepped all the way inside and shut the door. He leaned casually against the wall and crossed his arms, all the while keeping his eyes on Theo. When he pointed to his own mouth, silently asking if a spell had been cast on him, Theo nodded. Draco then perked up his ears and listened to the voices in the other room. There were definitely three. One female. *Shit.*

Finally, the yelling died down a little and, a few seconds later, Hermione, Bronson and Quigley walked into the room. When they saw him, Bronson and Hermione

froze but Quigley screamed all over again, pulling frantically at his hair.

"Holy shit, we're all going to die!"

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Are you? At this point, I'm only targeting Bronson. But, looking at Theo, it's probably a pretty good assumption that he wouldn't hesitate."

"AHH!"

Bronson rolled his eyes. "Calm down, Quigley. Do you honestly think I could be harboring a fugitive in our building without the Death Eater who lives upstairs knowing about it?"

Quigley froze and looked hopefully at Draco.

"Well, obviously," said Draco, stepping forward. "I'm the one who fucking brought her here."

Quigley let out a breath of relief and calmed slightly.

"Cast a Silencing Charm around the flat, Hermione," ordered Draco. "I've had too much experience today with people showing up in places they shouldn't be." He moved his narrowed eyes to Theo.

Hermione did as she was told.

"Now, how the *hell* did this happen?" he asked, darting his eyes between Hermione and Bronson.

Bronson sucked in his lips and Hermione cast her eyes shamefully to the floor.

"We lost track of time downstairs," Bronson finally answered, "and when we came up, Quigley was already home. He was talking to someone inside. I guess Theo had let himself in, and -"

"He was trying to arrest them, Draco," Hermione interrupted.

Draco looked at her and raised his eyebrows. "So you decided to play hero?"

"Well, I wasn't just going to stand in the hallway and do nothing!" she defended. "I know you're probably angry but -"

"I'm not angry," he said in a calm, even tone.

Hermione pursed her eyebrows. "You're not?"

Draco shook his head, still keeping his eyes on Theo.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Would you rather I was?"

"Well, it would certainly be more normal."

Draco smirked. "I'm not angry because I'm not surprised. You're friends with Potter, and the whole lot of you have a bloody hero complex I will never understand."

Theo began to breathe heavily as he stared at them with fiery eyes.

"Remove the Silencing Charm on him, will you?"

Hermione waved her wand at Theo.

"You bloody fucking bastard!" were the first words out of his mouth.

"You Death Eaters really do have the worst potty mouths," said Bronson, slumping down on his sofa. He tried to get Quigley to take a seat with him, but he was too busy fidgeting around nervously to sit still.

"Why were you trying to arrest Bronson?" Draco asked Theo.

"I wasn't going to actually fucking do it," he spat. "I was just trying to get him to talk!"

"Ah! You see, Hermione? I told you he was bluffing!" Bronson said proudly.

"Talk about what?" asked Draco.

"About *her*!" said Theo, motioning his head towards Hermione. "I heard you two fuckers talking about her the night we all went out and I have been *trying* to ask you about it, but you keep fucking avoiding me!"

Draco crinkled his forehead. "I wasn't avoiding you."

"Then where the hell have you been? I tried to talk to you after the fucking meeting the other day -"

"I went to try and stop Rabastan from capturing her fucking parents," said Draco. There was no point in lying now. Theo was already here … and tied to a chair.

"How?"

"None of your fucking business."

"Then what about yesterday when I owled you -"

"Hermione's father had just died. I wasn't about to leave her alone because you wanted to have a fucking conversation."

Theo moved his eyes to Hermione and grunted. "And today. I waited at your place for hours. Where the fuck were you?"

Draco brought his eyes down to the bag on his hip. He sighed before reaching into it and pulling the frame with the photo of Hermione and her parents out of it. He handed it to her before putting the bag down against the back of the sofa.

Hermione gasped. "You … you went to my house?"

Draco nodded.

As Hermione looked at the photo, she brought her hand up to her mouth and tried to hold in a whimper. "And did it look all right? Still in one piece?"

Draco smiled. "Yes, Hermione. It was essentially untouched."

Hermione reached out and touched her father's figure. She wished they had a photo together with a magic camera, so that she might see him moving around, acting as alive as he had been the last time she saw him. But, alas, she had never thought to use one.

"I can't believe you, Draco! I can't believe you're risking your fucking life for Granger!" hissed Theo. "You know they're talking spy after everything that went down in Australia? Rabastan and them already have it fucking out for you! No Mudblood or her filthy parents are worth -"

Hermione's eyes shot up. Her hand curved into a fist and she lunged forward, hitting Theo hard across the face. "How dare you! How dare you speak that way about my parents!" She hit him again.

Draco moved to grab her wrists, but she pulled them away.

"You fucking bastard! I bet you helped your sick father find them, didn't you?"

"Hermione, calm down," said Draco, grabbing her again. "He didn't -"

"NO! No, I will not calm down!" she shouted, swinging to hit Theo again, but Draco

hugged his arms around her shoulders before she could, picking her up and carrying her kicking and screaming towards the kitchen. "Fuck you, Theo Nott! You sick, fucking bastard!"

Theo smirked. "Never thought I'd hear such language coming from the Gryffindor princess's mouth."

"Oh, she gets very passionate at times," said Bronson with a chuckle.

"Hermione, please calm down," Theo heard Draco say just out of view in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said while sobbing. "I still have trouble controlling my anger."

"I know," he said. "At least you didn't think to take out your wand this time, like you did with me."

They both chuckled halfheartedly.

"The fuck …" Theo muttered to himself while listening.

"Give me your wand."

Theo heard some shuffling and then the kitchen went quiet. Another Silencing Charm.

He whipped his head towards Bronson, who shrugged before taking out a cigarette and lighting it in the middle of his living room. Quigley had finally calmed a little and was leaning against the back of the sofa. He stole Bronson's cigarette and began smoking it anxiously.

"Hey!" Bronson shouted. He rolled his eyes before taking another one out and lighting it.

Theo looked back towards the kitchen. He couldn't see Draco and Hermione from here, so he started leaning sideways in his chair, just making out Hermione's bushy hair. So he leaned a little more. There were two hands cupping her face while she continued to cry, obviously speaking passionately. Then the hands were stroking her cheeks, causing her to calm slightly. And then Theo could see Draco's face, leaning forward until his lips met Hermione's.

Holy fuck, they were kissing! Theo's eyes went wide as he leaned a little too far and fell over. "WHOA!"

Bronson laughed and stood up. He went over to Theo and put the chair he was tied to back on its legs, glancing into the kitchen where Hermione and Draco were still going at it.

"WHAT THE FUCK?" shouted Theo.

"Yes, I had a similar reaction when I found out," said Bronson. "So … you remember me *almost* saying her name, but you don't remember what we were saying about her?" He had an amused grin.

"I was fucking drunk! I'm a little vague on the details! Wait … weren't you talking about shagging? Holy fuck, are they shagging?"

"It's Malfoy. What the hell do you think," said Bronson, holding his cigarette down so Theo could take a drag.

Just then, Draco and Hermione walked back into the living room.

Theo quickly blew out his puff of smoke and shouted, "You're fucking shagging Granger?"

Draco went white and stared accusingly at Bronson, who held up his hands defensively.

"Don't look at me. He caught sight of your little snogging session in the kitchen."

"If you wanted to fucking shag her, then you should have just taken her as your fucking slave like everyone else!"

The entire room went silent. Hermione's face dropped while Bronson burned himself, trying to catch his cigarette as it fell out of his slackened jaw. Quigley did not fully understand what was going on, but he knew better than to open his mouth in this moment. And Draco … his entire body burned red while his face distorted in incredible anger. His fists clenched and he swung his arm, hitting Theo so hard his chair fell backwards.

"How dare you!" said Draco through clenched teeth. "How fucking dare you!" He grabbed Theo by the collar and pulled him, and the chair forward towards his raging face. "Don't you ever, EVER speak like that again!"

"Malfoy, cool it," said Bronson, grabbing at his shoulder, but Draco just shook him off.

"Draco, stop!" shouted Hermione, grabbing at his other shoulder.

"Did he ever fucking touch you?" Draco demanded.

"No!" Hermione said quickly. "No, I never saw him! Just once my first time there, and then never again!"

"You wouldn't lie to -"

"Of course not! When Parkinson came over, I told you *exactly* how I felt about her! And you meet Theo all the time! Don't you think I would have said something if I had any negative feelings towards him?"

Draco huffed. "Fine," he said, putting the chair back on its legs. "But if he says one more thing out of line -"

"So is she the one who wrote that fucking letter to Parkinson?" asked Theo, spitting some blood out of his mouth. "I knew, I *knew* that didn't fucking sound like you!"

Hermione frowned. "Yes, I admit, in my anger, I failed to grasp Draco's proper essence."

"I want to talk to Granger," Theo said.

Draco huffed. "Go right ahea -"

"*Alone.*"

"Fuck no you're -"

"Draco, it's fine," said Hermione. "We have his wand and I made those binds strong. What can he possibly do?"

"Don't underestimate -"

"I won't," she said. "But we're not exactly resolving anything here. Why don't the three of you go and wait on the balcony, and I'll get you when we're finished."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Hold on!" Quigley shouted suddenly. "Before I go anywhere, there is something *very* important I think we all need to discuss."

"And what's that?" asked Bronson. They all waited.

Quigley looked at Hermione and asked, "Are you the cupcake girl?"

Bronson laughed while Draco rolled his eyes. "Why are you both so obsessed with that bloody fucking cupcake?"

"Is that a yes?"

No one answered as Bronson stepped forward and dragged Quigley outside. Draco looked hesitantly at Hermione before slowly following. "Don't you fucking try anything, Theo."

"Yeah, I'm tied to a bloody chair!" he called after him. "What the fuck you think I'm gonna do?"

As soon as they were all gone and the door to the balcony was closed, Hermione grabbed another chair from the kitchen and put it in front of Theo. She sat down and crossed her arms. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Let's start with how the fuck you ended up here."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Well, it wasn't planned, if that's what you mean. I was out on the streets and Draco recognized me, so he brought me back here."

"And you just willingly walked into a Death Eater's home?"

"No," she said. "I didn't want his help, but there were Death Eaters everywhere and I was sort of out of options, so I took a chance." She smirked. "You almost caught me, you know. On the Knight Bus."

Theo's eyes widened. "You were the fucking girl he told Rabastan not to wake?"

"That's right," she said.

"Well … fuck!" said Theo. "But that was over two months ago. How long have the two of you been fucking shagging?"

Hermione's jaw clenched. "I'm not answering that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's personal and absolutely none of your business."

"And is it none of Draco's business that his father fucking took your virginity?"

Hermione's heart stopped as all life drained from her body, every piece of her slackening from her jaw to her arms, unable to hold herself together as she looked

at Theo with sad eyes.

"He doesn't know, does he?"

Hermione cast her eyes to the floor and slowly shook her head.

Theo smirked. "That's what I thought. Draco would never be shagging you if he knew."

"H-how …"

"Do I know?" Theo finished.

Hermione nodded.

"I was fucking there, Granger. Forced to watch that disgusting display before the Dark Lord would put his mark on my arm. I was just lucky I wasn't a Death Eater yet or else my father probably would have forced me to take my fucking turn with you."

Tears dripped slowly from Hermione's eyes as she was suddenly forced to recall that horrible night. The roaring thunder, the smile on Voldemort's face, the shameful look in Lucius Malfoy's eyes as his lord pushed him forward, forcing him to steal her innocence only hours after he lost his wife. And he did it. Even though he had no desire, he still did it.

"Granger!"

The sound of Hermione's name brought her back to reality. She looked up at Theo and said in a crackly voice, "Please, don't tell him. I do plan to, but … there's just no good way to tell someone that."

"You should have fucking told him before."

"I know," she said. "And I meant to, but I just … I didn't want him to look at me differently. For the most part, Draco is really good about holding back those pitiful looks I hate so much. But if he knows about …" she gulped … "his father, then it won't be the same."

"Obviously," scoffed Theo.

Hermione sighed. "Please."

Theo gazed back at her for a moment, the pleading look in her eyes making even

him want to give her that pitiful look she apparently hated so much. Just to get her to stop, he nodded.

"Thank you."

"But I don't want you erasing my memories," he said. "So we're going to have to come up with a fucking compromise."

"Well, I'm not letting you out of here without doing something," she said. "You have given me absolutely no reason to trust you."

"Other than agreeing to keep your disgusting secret?"

Hermione's jaw clenched.

Theo sighed. "I … I didn't mean that. And earlier … about your parents … for what it's worth, I'm sorry. About your father. Mine can be a bit … well, he's mental."

"Yes, I know," said Hermione. "Draco told me about what he had You-Know-Who do to you."

"Do you know Legilimency?" Theo asked, quickly changing the subject.

Hermione nodded. "I'm just learning."

"Then use it to look in my mind. To see that you can trust me. I know how to use it and Occlumency but I can't plant false memories. Draco can confirm that for me."

Hermione pursed her lips before slowly lifting her wand. She knew this was dangerous, but a part of her really wanted to know what Theo could possibly have to show her. So she went against her better judgment and suddenly shouted, "*Legilimens*!"

Hermione was immediately sucked back to her first time staying in the Nott's as a slave. The second people to own her after Rodolphus. Theo was there when she was dragged in. The one time she ever saw him. And then she was pulled forward.

Theo was walking down the stairs to the basement with a tray of food and a pitcher of water in his hands. She could hear herself crying on the other side of the door at the bottom of the stairs. When he reached the door, he opened it a crack and slipped the food and water inside. Then he shut it just as quickly and left. Hermione remembered this. Every time she stayed in their home, someone brought her food and water. She had always just assumed it was the house-elf.

And then she was pulled even more forward, watching Theo in several other scenarios where he helped other slaves his father took in, whether it was bringing them food and water, or letting them sleep in one of the bedrooms when his father was out of town.

But then there was someone else. An old woman with a kind face who Theo sat with while she made cottage pie in the kitchen. She would smile fondly at him while he chatted about one thing or another, letting him help her and teaching him the basics of cooking.

And Hermione moved forward again, this time she was in the Goyles' home and Theo was sitting with Gregory in his bedroom. He stood up and walked out, saying he had to use the loo, but, instead, slipping into a closet-sized room where the old woman was laying down, looking weak. She sat up as he entered, and Theo gulped before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a green handkerchief covering an object. The old woman opened it and gasped when she came face-to-face with a knife. *The* knife.

"The trade's tomorrow," said Theo. "Use this and get out of here." That was all he said before slipping back out the door, sending Hermione forward once more until she was in the Nott house again, Theo standing near Draco while Bellatrix forced Pansy Parkinson to torture the old woman for information. He was masking the pain well, even managing to look almost bored. But, every so often, he would turn his head so no one could see him wince.

Suddenly, she heard Bellatrix say, "Draco, get over here."

Hermione tried to pull out of his mind. She knew what was coming next and she did not want to see it.

But, before she could, hers and Theo's thoughts became distracted when Bronson's voice entered their ears.

And then Hermione was pulled forward again, this time stopping in a fairly recent memory, where Bronson half-carried a drunken Theo into his home.

"I can fuckin' do it myself," said Theo, pushing at him. He stumbled forward with Bronson still following at his heels, trying to keep him steady, especially as he tried to head down the stairs to the basement, tripping on every other step as he did so.

Theo opened the door and scanned the dark space until he found the slave girl sleeping on the floor.

"You again," he said as her head popped up. "You know the f'ckin' drill. He's gone for the night so find a fu … *hiccup* ... fu … *hiccup* … bloody bed."

She nodded and said, "Thank you," before running past him.

Bronson watched her with wide eyes and a slacken jaw. It was obvious he was thinking about Hermione as he stared at the filthy, beaten slave.

"Th-fuck you lookin' at?" said Theo before stumbling back up the stairs. He almost fell back but Bronson caught him, keeping his hands behind Theo's back as he walked up the the last few steps.

After some more stumbling, Theo finally made it to his bedroom, where he immediately began stripping off his clothes until he was in nothing but his boxer shorts, collapsing ungracefully onto the bed. And then he began touching himself, causing Bronson to raise his eyebrows.

*Oh Merlin*, thought Hermione, trying once again to pull herself out of his head. But exiting had always been a bit of a problem for her and nothing seemed to be happening.

Bronson stepped further into the room and took a seat beside Theo on the bed. He then proceeded to lend him a hand, literally, causing Theo to moan as he leaned down to kiss his neck.

*Let me out, let me out, let me out!*

*Get the fuck out*! She heard Theo's inner thoughts screaming at her.

And then Bronson was kissing down his chest, falling to his knees and stopping just before the waistband of Theo's boxer shorts.

*Merlin, no*!

"You want a formal invitation or something? Just fucking do it already," Theo said, leaning on his elbows and looking down at him.

Bronson grinned at him before slipping his fingers into the edges of Theo's boxer shorts and slowly slipping them -

"AHHHH!" Hermione screamed as she finally managed to pull out of Theo's mind with such a force, she fell out of her chair.

Hearing the commotion, Draco ran inside and collapsed down beside her.

"Hermione, what the fuck? Are you all right?"

She looked at him and then past him, to where Bronson was standing. She began laughing hysterically, practically rolling on the floor at the realization that so much more had happened between them than she actually thought. And, she had to admit, the laughter felt good. Especially after the last couple of days she had been having.

"It's not fucking funny!" Theo shouted from his chair, turning red in the face. "Why the fuck did you go there?"

"Why did you take me there?" she asked while sitting up. Seeing Theo sprouted a new round of giggles. "Bronson, were you shouting outside?"

"Uh … yeah," he said, scratching at his head. "Malfoy and I were having a bit of a dispute. Why?"

"No reason," she said, smirking at Theo, who looked far less amused than she did.

"What have you two been doing in here?" asked Draco, helping her back to her feet.

"I was using Legilimency on him," she said. "He wanted to prove that we can trust him."

"There was no need to use Legilimency for that," said Draco. "I can already tell you that we can't."

Theo scowled at him. "Excuse me? We've been friends since we were fucking babies and you don't trust me?"

"It's not that I don't trust you," said Draco, even though he didn't. "It's that I don't want to have to bloody deal with another fucking person. Enough people already know about this. Besides, you enjoy being a Death Eater."

"No I don't!"

"Could have bloody fooled me."

"And *you* could have fooled *me*!" shouted Theo. "It's all a fucking game, isn't it? We do what we have to to stay alive! That's it!"

"Why do you want in on this, anyway?" asked Draco. "If you want to stay alive so bad then helping Hermione isn't the fucking way to go."

"You're right, it's a fucking risk and I would rather not be any part of this!" Theo sighed before moving his eyes back to Hermione. "But Anna gave you that knife. She wanted you to live and I'll be damned before I let her death be in vain!"

Hermione smiled weakly. "Was that her name? I know it's horrible, but I never knew."

"It was," he said. "Anna Abbott. The grandmother of that bloody Hufflepuff girl in our year, and a pureblood. But blood traitors are just as bad as fucking Muggles in the Dark Lord's eyes." Theo gulped. "I … I never had a grandmother, or a mother of my own, and Anna … she was kind to me. I know she was a slave, but I never saw her that way. I never saw any of them that way."

"You gave me food," Hermione said with a frown.

"Look, we went to school together, all right? That made you more real than the rest" he said. "But then, when you left, they all started to become real and I just … I had to do something. I couldn't just let it go. So I've helped them. Every last slave who has come through my father's door." Theo cast his eyes nervously to the floor. "I want to help you."

"Well, you bloody can't," said Draco. "So why don't you just sit back while I erase your fucking memories and -"

"Tell him about his father, Draco," Hermione said suddenly. "He should know about what Rabastan and the others are doing."

Draco's eyes widened as he stared harshly at her.

"He should know," she said, meeting his gaze.

Draco did not like it, but he supposed telling Theo all of this before erasing his memories did no harm. He crossed his arms and said, "Rabastan threatened me. He said he was sick of our generation trying to take over and if I didn't find Hermione then he would have each and every person I cared about killed. You were second on the list, and your father has already volunteered to do the dirty work."

Theo's face went stiff as he continued to gaze at his oldest friend. He shook his head and said, "Why am I not surprised? Fucking bastard has had it out for me ever since I took his seat."

Draco nodded. "So what exactly is your plan here, Hermione. I'm not letting him just walk the fuck out of here."

"I know," she said, "but I think he can be useful. And I would really feel better about you spending your days with Death Eaters if I knew one of them was on your side."

"So … what? The Imperius Curse?"

Theo's eyes widened. "Fuck. No."

"It really is our best option," said Hermione, strengthening her grasp on her wand.

"NO!" shouted Theo. "No, I will *not* let you take away my bloody freewill! I'd rather you erased my fucking memories than do that!"

"We won't take away your freewill, Theo," said Hermione. "If we do it right then we can order you to keep that. We just need to make it so you can't speak of me being here outside of these walls."

"But what about him?" asked Theo, motioning towards Quigley. "Are you going to fucking Imperius him too?"

"No," said Draco. "I plan to erase his memories."

"Oh, no!" shouted Quigley, holding out his hands as he took a step back. "If we're going to keep a bloody fugitive in our building then I *deserve* to know about it! No memory erasing!"

"You can trust him, Malfoy," said Bronson, leaning against the back of the sofa. "Remember, you have the same dirt on him that you have on me. So we're all good." He gave him a thumbs up.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Fine. He can keep his bloody memories," he said, obviously not happy. "Clearly, this was a bloody awful day for me to leave the fucking city."

"Seems that way," said Bronson with a smirk. "Personally, I'm happy this is all out in the open. At least now I won't have to constantly convince Quigley that we're not *actually* lovers."

Draco ignored him and turned back to Theo. "So what will it be? Memory-Erasing Charm or the Imperius Curse? The choice is yours."

Theo narrowed his eyes and shook his head before finally muttering, "Imperius Curse you fucking prick."

"Oh, wonderful!" shouted Bronson, the only one who seemed to be overjoyed by this outcome.

"Fine," said Draco. "Hermione, give me your wand. I have more practice with them than you do, and if you seriously want him to keep his freewill then I should do it."

Hermione nodded before slowly handing him her wand.

Draco took it and pointed it at Theo. "I really am sorry about this, Theo," he said, "but it has to be done." Theo said nothing, keeping his eyes fixed on Draco as his oldest friend suddenly said, "*Imperio*!"

And then all anxiety Theo was feeling quickly banished from his body, leaving him feeling calmer than he had in years. Well, this was not an unpleasant experience at all …

# Chapter 15: I Got A Woman

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Draco stood in his washroom, leaning against the wall while Hermione was in front of the mirror, using her wand to fiddle with her hair.

"What do you think? Blonde?" She cast a spell to make her hair lighter. "Or brunette?" And then she changed it so it was darker, almost black.

"Neither," he said. "I'd rather you just kept your usual appearance and stayed -"

"Brunette!" Theo called from Draco's bedroom, lying sprawled across the bed while flipping through *Hogwarts: A History*.

"He's being much more cooperative than you are," said Hermione with a smile. She straightened her hair and lengthened it, slashing her wand quickly across her forehead. "Bangs?" she asked as they suddenly appeared.

Draco grunted. "You look less like you with them, so yes."

She smiled wider. "Now, was that so hard?"

Draco's face tensed and fists clenched as he looked away from her, breathing heavily through his nose. Suddenly, he felt a soft hand enter his own. He turned back to see Hermione and her strange hair standing incredibly close.

"It's going to be fine, Draco. Please, stop worrying." She leaned in and pressed her lips to his cheek.

Draco reached his hand up and pushed the bangs out of her face before kissing her lips.

"Focus, you two!" Theo called from the other room, now lying on his stomach with his feet in the air while he flipped another page.

Hermione smiled and rolled her eyes before giving Draco one last kiss and returning to the mirror. She put her wand to her eyes and turned them green.

"No," Draco said sternly. "You look too much like a fucking female Potter when you do that."

Hermione crinkled her forehead as she continued to gaze into the mirror. Other than the coloring, she did not think she looked much like Harry, but she didn't want to argue so she made her eyes ice-blue instead. Then she removed all of her freckles and made her skin a few shades lighter, lengthened her nose, broadened her chin, thinned her lips. While Polyjuice Potion seemed like the more obvious solution for this, they had already decided that the current hairs she had would be too risky to use while inside of the city, since their owners were, most likely, still around.

Suddenly, an owl burst into the room, nearly knocking into her head.

"Ah!" she screamed.

"OI! Malfoy! There's another one!" said Bronson, walking into the bedroom. "Third this week. Someone really wants to get ahold of you." He smirked.

Draco groaned before taking the letter from the owl and chasing it back out the balcony door where it had come from. Quigley was smoking a cigarette out there. "Your other girlfriend again?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Draco punched his arm hard before going inside and tossing the letter sealed with the Greengrass crest into the wastebasket. It was officially December, Astoria had moved to town, and she was trying to cash in on that promise he had made her father to show her around. Needless to say, Draco had no interest in doing that. Especially with their pending engagement.

Pansy had found out for him that this … 'arrangement' had actually been made by their parents years ago. Only, it was Daphne he had been promised to originally, but since her family had more-or-less disowned her, it became about Astoria instead.

Following Voldemort's victory, it had pretty much been forgotten about but, recently Arron Greengrass approached Lucius with the idea, wanting to unite their families once more. He had agreed, so Arron's next step had been to go to Lord Voldemort, who was originally against the idea of his favorite Death Eater getting married, until he had been reminded about how none of the purebloods from Draco's generation had married or procreated yet. Voldemort wanted to keep that purity alive, and Draco and Astoria were the perfect candidates for the task.

Of course, Draco had tried to keep this information from Hermione, but then the

owls started arriving, and he had no choice but to come clean.

Just then, Hermione walked out of the bedroom while pulling on an olive-green jumper over her white shirt. When it was on, she grabbed her small bag off of the counter. "Are you ready?" she asked, looking at Draco.

He frowned. "I don't like this."

"I know," she said, walking over to him and taking his hand. "But you already agreed." She smiled before giving him a kiss with her thinner, foreign lips. Draco did not like *that* either. "I just want to see what's there, Draco. And then never again."

Draco groaned.

She smiled wider. "Besides, I am going to have two horribly frightening Death Eaters with me. What could possibly happen?"

"Aannnddd … you just jinxed us all," said Quigley, walking inside with a smirk.

"Oh, I don't believe in that nonsense!" said Hermione. "It will be fine. Now, shouldn't we get a move on?"

Theo and Bronson came out of the bedroom, and they all went over to the closet to take out their cloaks, Draco helping Hermione into hers before putting on his own. He took some forged identification papers out of his pocket and handed them to her.

"Your name is Allison Darby. Make sure you guard these carefully. People try to steal them off of others all the time, and this was the last favor I had with my forger. We can't afford to lose them."

Hermione nodded and said, "Just call me Allie," before slipping them into the hidden pocket she had made on the inside of her cloak, right next to the pouch of Galleons he had given her previously and the stone that would let her Apparate.

"You have a bloody forger?" asked Theo, pursing his eyebrows.

Draco looked at him and smirked.

"I feel like I don't know you at all."

"I have made a point to form certain connections over the years, Theo. You would be wise to do the same."

"I would but, you know, freewill taken from me and all."

Draco rolled his eyes. "You keep saying that, but you're as fucking annoying as ever, so I can't imagine you're that affected by it."

"Guess we'll never know," said Theo, opening the door and stepping out first.

The others all followed, Hermione holding tightly onto Draco's hand as they descended the staircase. He stopped them on the second floor and let the others go ahead, pulling her into him and kissing her softly.

"You're really sure about this?" he said while looking into her strange, blue eyes.

Hermione gulped and nodded. "I need to get out of the flat and this needs to be done. You've never been on the run before, Draco. You don't know what will be useful."

Draco sighed before kissing her again. "If anything is to happen and we're separated, find a Floo, use that stone, and get the fuck back here. You understand?"

Hermione nodded again. "Yes, Draco. And thank you for letting me do this," she said while rubbing her hands along his back. They kissed one last time before one again linking hands and heading down the last flight of stairs.

When they got to the first floor, Bronson grinned as he held out his hand to her and said, "Ready, girlfriend?"

Hermione grinned back before hesitantly letting go of Draco's hand and taking his.

"So why is the gay guy playing her boyfriend again?" asked Theo, who was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

"Because Malfoy doesn't want either of you straight bastards holding her hand," said Bronson, swinging his and Hermione's arms joyfully.

"Hermione's the one who picked you, you fucking idiot," said Draco, pushing past him and heading out the front door.

Theo and Quigley followed after him, Bronson then attempting to until Hermione pulled him back.

"I … I don't know about this," she said suddenly.

"Relax, Hermione," he said, giving her hand a squeeze. "Everything will be fine. Even though you're stuck holding my hand instead of Malfoy's, he's going to be right there the entire time, and you know he's not going to let anything happen to you. Neither will I."

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded. She took one step forward, and then another, slowly moving towards the door until she was standing on the last square of tile. She looked down at it nervously before stepping through the doorway, and onto the cement stoop just outside of it. With a sigh of relief, Hermione headed down the stairs with Bronson just beside her, keeping her eyes on Draco the entire way down.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Yes," said Hermione before looking around and taking it all in. She was outside, the fresh air brushing against her face as a cool breeze shot by them, sending the fallen leaves rustling down the sidewalk. She inhaled deeply. "It is so nice to breathe fresh air that isn't littered with cigarette smoke."

Just then, there was a click and they all looked over to see Quigley lighting a cigarette with his wand. He looked up at all of them, his eyes darting around. "Oh, sorry. Are we not doing this?" He quickly waved his wand and unlit the cigarette before putting it back in the pack.

"It's fine," said Hermione. "I know you all are addicted to that disgusting habit, and at least now I have space to avoid it."

Quigley started to take his cigarette out again, but one stern look from Draco and he was quick to put it back.

Hermione still felt nervous but, since there was a light drizzle, she was able to put her hood on without looking suspicious, making her feel slightly more secure.

The five of them walked down the street, Draco making sure to stay on Hermione's other side even though the narrow sidewalk did not really allow it. At least they knew no cars would be coming, which made Bronson happy since he was the one kicked off the edge.

They eventually arrived at the spot where Hermione and Draco had gotten off the Knight Bus that very first night they found each other. Standing on the curb, they all waited patiently. Except for Draco, who was pacing with his arms crossed.

"Stop being so fucking antsy," said Theo. "We're trying *not* to look suspicious,

remember?"

"I just want this to be fucking over already," said Draco, stopping his pacing but starting to fidget with the cloth of his cloak. He glanced sideways at Hermione, who was staring straight ahead, trying to breathe steadily while squeezing the life out of Bronson's hand.

Suddenly, a triple-decker purple bus pulled in front of them, stopping with a loud BANG. Draco stepped on first, giving Stan Shunpike enough money for all of them to ride quickly so he would not have to listen to his annoying speech. He also purchased a chocolate bar, which he handed to Hermione. She smiled and laughed at the joke, easing slightly as they took their seats, all of the beds currently replaced by comfortable sofas since it was daytime. This time, she ate the candy willingly.

"I miss Apparating," said Theo with a frown. "This Knight Bus is so fucking annoying."

"At least you Death Eaters can Floo," said Bronson. "I actually have to take this shit home every night."

Hermione was surprised that Theo was actually sitting next to Bronson. Over the last couple of weeks, and her unfortunate encounter in his mind, she could not help but notice that he often made a point to be as far from him as possible. She had not told Draco about what she saw, even though he had asked numerous times what it was in Theo's mind that had made her scream so suddenly. She knew it was not her place to say, but almost every time she looked at Theo she would find herself giggling, so she was pretty sure Draco had come up with his own conclusions about what she had seen.

Throughout the entire bus ride, Hermione could feel Draco's eyes on her. She turned to him every now and then and smiled, just to reassure him that everything was all right, but the further they got from his flat, the more nervous she became. Staring down at hers and Bronson's clasped hands, she could not help but wish that it was Draco's hand she was holding, but that would have been too risky. Draco could not look like he had a girlfriend in case they ran into other Death Eaters.

She wasn't his girlfriend, of course! But if they were walking around holding hands, observers would obviously jump to conclusions.

"Why are you blushing like that?"

Hermione was torn out of her daze and whipped her head to look at Theo, who was watching her closely. "I'm not," she said while moving her eyes to the floor.

"Yes you -"

"Our stop is next," interrupted Draco as he got to his feet.

Everyone else followed his lead.

Right at that moment, some girl walked by Draco, making sure to knock him exceptionally hard. He fell into Hermione and barely caught her, as well as himself, before they could go plummeting over the back of the sofa.

"Excuse you!" he said, whirling his head and staring coldly at her.

"Oh, *sorry*, asshole," said the girl while turning to face him. She crossed her arms and gave Hermione a good onceover. "Is *this* your *wife*?"

Draco pursed his eyebrows. "Do I fucking know you or something?"

The girl suddenly looked very angry. "Are you kidding?"

Draco shrugged his shoulders.

After letting out a frustrated huff, the girl looked at Hermione and said, "If you *are* his wife then I suggest you start looking into divorce as an option, because your slutty husband has been fooling around with every bloody witch in town."

Hermione looked up at Draco, who had gone incredibly stiff. She rolled her eyes before pushing him off of her and grabbing back onto Bronson's hand. "I'm not his wife," she scoffed. "He's not even married. And, if you believe he is, I can only imagine that you are one of the many slags he brings home at night."

The girl opened her mouth to say something but, before she could, Hermione continued.

"He lied to you, like he lies to all of his slags to get them out of his bloody flat. But what really gets me is how women like you actually expect the men you go home with only hours, sometimes minutes after meeting them to be of any quality. So, instead of getting on him for being an asshole, maybe you should sit down and take a good long look at your own life and choices."

And with that, Hermione grabbed Draco's wrist and pulled him and Bronson towards the front of the bus, leaving the girl standing there with her jaw dropped to

the floor.

Quigley followed them, laughing, but Theo went right up to her and said, "So, if it's Death Eaters you're into," he lifted up his sleeve so she could get a good look at his tattoo, "I'm going to be at the Leaky Cauldron on Friday night and -"

"Theo! Step away from the slag!" Hermione shouted from the front of the bus.

"Ah, don't listen to her. There is nothing wrong with a promiscuous woman," he said. "Leaky Cauldron. Friday night. I'll see you there." Theo took a couple steps backwards and gave the girl a wink before turning and joining the others.

"Trying to milk off of Malfoy's sloppy seconds, are you?" asked Quigley with a smirk.

"Wouldn't be the first time," said Theo. "It's kind of hard not to hit some of his seconds considering all of the bloody women he's been with."

Draco's eyes widened. He bared his teeth while shaking his head at his oldest friend, not blind to the way Hermione was looking anywhere but at him.

Finally, Hermione's wandering eyes landed on Theo, who seemed to be watching Bronson out of the corner of his eye. She turned to her pretend boyfriend and noticed him eyeing some wizard who had just walked to the front of the bus, smiling slyly at him as he did so.

"Hey!" she said, tugging on his hand.

"Sorry!" he said, quickly turning his head back towards her.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. He smirked before kissing her cheek.

"Forgive me, schnookums."

Hermione crinkled her nose. "Schnookums? Seriously? All of the pet names in the world and that's the best you can come up with?"

BANG. The bus came to a stop and everyone standing in the front of it grabbed onto the closest pole, trying to stop themselves from toppling over.

"You would think that with all the advances in magic over the years, they would find a way to come up with a smoother ride," said Quigley as they all filed out with the crowd.

Along with their group, about fifteen other people stepped off of the Knight Bus. Hermione was a little surprised when they all started walking in different directions.

"Are we not all going to the same place?" she asked as Bronson pulled her towards a street no one else had gone down.

"Yes, but the Black Market is supposed to be a secret," he said, lifting his finger to his lips. "We can't just all enter from the same place at the same time."

"Who is it a secret from, exactly? We're entering with two Death Eaters."

"The Death Eaters who care more," said Theo, "like my father."

"And here we are!" said Bronson, stopping beside a Muggle phone booth. He opened the door and looked at Hermione. "After you, pudding."

"No," she said simply before walking inside.

"Really? And I thought for sure that one would be a hit. Never mind, never mind. I'll get it."

He stepped in after her, squashing her against the side so all five of them could fit in there. After Quigley did some fiddling to get the door shut, they all put their hands on the phone and took it off the hook, quickly transporting to another phone booth that they all burst out of. Draco grabbed Hermione and softened her fall by making her land on him, but the others all landed hard on the ground.

"Five really is too fucking many for this," said Theo, getting to his feet. Once he was stable, he grabbed Hermione's shoulders and pulled her off of Draco.

As soon as she was balanced, Hermione took a good look around to see where they were. "Is this King's Cross station?" she asked, looking back at Draco as he stood.

"Yes," he answered.

"The Black Market is in King's Cross?"

Draco smirked. "Something like that."

Bronson took her hand again, and they all started walking through the abandoned train station, not stopping until they were between platforms 9 and 10. Hermione eyed the brick wall curiously as several people walked out of it.

"In there?" she asked, looking around at the others. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," mocked Theo before walking through. He was followed by Quigley, and then Bronson, dragging Hermione along with him. She looked back at Draco, who smirked as she was yanked out of his view and onto platform 9 ¾.

When he arrived on the other side, Hermione was staring openmouthed at the bustling platform, her eyes darting around in circles as witches, wizards, goblins and house-elves sold their goods, all while customers pushed, chatted, haggled, and filed in and out of a red, 4-6-0 steam engine.

"Is that the Hogwarts Express?" asked Hermione while trying to get a good look at the lettering on the side of the train.

"It is," said Draco.

"But … isn't the school still open?"

"Yes, but the number of students attending since the war has reduced immensely. The train is hardly necessary, so students are required to find other means to get there."

"Plus, the Dark Lord hates the train since it's Muggle-made," added Theo.

"Come along, gumdrop. Shopping awaits."

"No, Bronson," said Hermione as he pulled her into the crowd.

"Ah, why not? They're delicious and sweet, *just like you*," he said, poking her nose.

"I am beginning to understand why you are single," she said while batting his finger away.

"Ouch, honey bear."

"*NO*."

"You women are no fun."

Hermione and Bronson went from booth to booth, looking closely at each item everyone had to offer. She wanted to be fully prepared whenever it came time for her to get out of the city.

The first item she purchased was a tent, wanting to hit herself for not thinking of it before. After living in one for almost a year, it was ridiculous to think that it had never crossed her mind. She also bought several books, some potions that kept food from spoiling, a canister that held an endless supply of water, an extra pair of traveling boots, some socks that heated feet and mittens that heated hands, and an invisibility cloak. It was not a very good one but it got the job done, which was all she could ask for. She could put a few extra spells on it herself if necessary.

While walking through the booths in different compartments inside of the train, Hermione could not help but notice two bulky-looking wizards guarding the door leading to the back coach.

"Why are they standing there?" she asked Bronson.

He glanced over to see what she was looking at. "That's where they keep the goods that are … well, let's just say they're harder to obtain. It's invitation only."

"Is that where you get your cigarettes?"

Bronson nodded.

"How did you get an invitation?"

He smirked. "The wizard who sells them is an old friend of mine. Knows I'm an addict and loves to bank off of that. Speaking of which …" He began glancing around, his eyes not stopping until he found Draco in the compartment across the way, who was putting a Wizard's Chess set into his bag. "OI! Malfoy!"

Draco turned and walked over. "What?"

"We need to restock," he said, taking out his pack of cigarettes and showing him that there were only two left in there. "Keep an eye on my girlfriend, will you?" He winked before looking around for Quigley, who was watching in amazement while Theo did tricks with a Screaming Yo-yo. "Quigs!"

Quigley looked around until he located him. Bronson pointed towards the back coaches and Quigley nodded before walking over.

"Did you see what he can do with that thing? It was bloody brilliant!"

"Yes, Theo is quite brilliant," said Bronson, glancing over his shoulder and giving Theo a wink.

Theo sneered at him before putting the yo-yo down and walking over to Hermione

and Draco.

"We about done here?" he asked.

"I think so," said Hermione. "I just wanted to visit a few more potion stands and -"

"Cover us, Theo," said Draco, grabbing Hermione's hand and pulling her into an empty compartment. Once inside, he pulled down the drapes and slammed her against the door, taking her wand out of her pocket to return her lips to normal before kissing her.

"Draco, this is hardly the place," said Hermione, even though she made no attempt to stop him as he continued to caress her.

"I know. I just … don't want you to be mad at me."

Hermione pulled away and crinkled her forehead. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"You know … because of that girl earlier."

"On the Knight Bus?"

Draco nodded.

Hermione smirked. "You think I'm mad about that?"

He nodded again.

"Well, I'm not," she said with a faint chuckle. "I was fully aware of your history with women going into this. After all, I had to *hear* it time and time again."

"True," said Draco while leaning in and kissing her neck, "but hearing and seeing are two very different things."

"Well, I didn't *see* you shag her." Hermione put her hands on his chest and pushed him away. "Why are you so concerned?"

"No reason," he said, kissing her lips again. "I just don't want you to be mad." And again.

Hermione brought her hands up to his hair and stroked it while he ran his along her hips, pulling her into him while he began to grow hard against her.

"We shouldn't do this here," she said between parts of their lips. "I'm a taken girl, remember?"

Draco smiled against her mouth and said, "Taken by me."

They both froze. *Shit.* That sounded possessive. He had not meant to say it like that.

Draco slowly pulled away and brought his hand up to her cheek. "Sorry," he said while giving it a stroke.

"It's fine," she said, dropping her hands to her side. "Draco …" Hermione looked up at him and gulped, unsure of what she wanted to say. "Are … are my eyes still blue?" she ended up asking. "They've been feeling a bit funny."

Looking deeply into them, Draco said, "Yes, but they've gotten a few shades darker." He lifted her wand and fixed them, giving her one last kiss before doing the same to her lips. "You still all right here?" he asked while reaching down to grab her hand.

"Yes," said Hermione. "But I don't want to be here much longer. We really shouldn't press our luck." She smiled.

Draco smiled back and nodded, giving her one final kiss on the cheek before letting go of her hand and opening the door. Theo was leaning against it on the other side and almost fell backwards. Luckily, he caught himself before turning towards them ungracefully.

"Finished spending a moment in a private compartment with your neighbor's girlfriend, are you?" he said with a smirk. "I suppose that's all right, since your goal was to act natural and all."

Draco narrowed his eyes at him, noticing, once again, as Hermione avoided looking at him. None of them noticed the hooded figure turn at the sound of their voices, their gaze immediately falling upon Hermione.

"You're a bastard," said Draco.

"As are you."

"I suppose that's why the two of you get on so well," said Hermione.

She pushed past both of them to walk further down the carriage, still not noticing as the hooded figure turned away quickly, the wizards guarding the back coach opening the door for them without hesitation.

Hermione looked in every compartment until she found another one with potions.

She went inside.

Theo followed her but, since it was so crowded in there, Draco stood just outside of it, leaning against the wall while staring out the window of the compartment just across from him. While scanning the people out there, he suddenly came across a familiar face that definitely looked out of place. His jaw dropped.

Draco shook his head about, hoping that his eyes were playing tricks on him. But, when he looked again, the same man was standing there, studying a small, gold bottle very thoroughly.

Poking his head into the compartment Hermione was in, Draco called, "Theo!"

Theo walked out. "What?"

Draco nodded towards the window.

Theo looked and gasped. "What's that fucker doing here?"

"Don't know, but I'm going to go find out. Keep an eye on her for me, will you? And *don't* let her go out there."

Theo nodded before heading back into the compartment.

Draco took a deep breath and headed outside. He clenched his fists while walking up to the man, who was still holding the gold bottle.

"Didn't expect to see you here."

Rodolphus jumped before turning his head to look at Draco. He put his wand to his throat. "Malfoy, why are you -?"

"I don't think my being here is the oddity. Why are *you* here?" Draco looked down at the bottle he was holding, just able to make out the small, black lettering on the label. His eyes widened. "What the fuck is that for?"

"Here you go, sir." A young wizard, who was working the booth, put two well-sized boxes on the counter in front of Rodolphus. "This is all the Amortentia we have. That'll be three-hundred Galleons."

Draco looked at the boxes, and then back at Rodolphus. He furrowed his brow. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Rodolphus ignored him, handing the shop boy a pouch of money. He immediately

began counting, smiling when he saw it was all there.

"Pleasure doing business with you."

"I don't know what you expect to do with all of that," said Draco with a sneer. "You know your brother doesn't plan to keep her alive long enough to even use one bottle."

"Rabastan and I see her future very differently," said Rodolphus as he slipped the bottle he was holding into one of the boxes. "Do not concern yourself with this."

"Oh shit," said Draco, gaping at him. "You're planning on pulling a fucking runner with her, aren't you?"

"I repeat, it is none of your concern," said Rodolphus before reaching into his pocket. "But, whatever I have planned for the future, it is clear that my brother and I no longer see eye-to-eye." He pulled out a small object. The Lestrange crest. "There are ten others, and the only time they are not on their owners is when they are with the Dark Lord." He tossed it into the air and Draco caught it. "I trust that information is worth your silence."

Rodolphus put his wand back in his pocket before picking up the boxes and walking away. Draco followed him with his eyes, his heart nearly stopping when he saw Hermione walk out of the train at precisely that moment. She noticed Rodolphus, but played it off well by turning and heading towards Draco. He did not even notice her.

Bronson followed her out.

"What was *he* doing here?" Hermione asked when she reached Draco.

"Being the sick bastard we all love to loathe," he said. "Where the fuck is Theo? He was supposed to be keeping you inside."

"Oh! Is that why he was trying to distract us with that bloody yo-yo again?" said Bronson. "Yeah, we got bored and left, but Quigley will be entertained for hours."

Draco noticed Hermione was looking at him. When he met her eyes, she frowned. "You know, you could have just told me he was out here and I would have stayed inside. I don't know why you and Theo insist on being so secretive all of the time."

Hermione walked past him and began looking through the potions at the booth Rodolphus had just been at. Bronson looked at Draco and sucked his breath in through his teeth before joining her.

"So what are we looking at, cupcake?"

"Now, that one is definitely a no."

"Oh, come on!"

Just then, Theo ran out of the train, looking around frantically until he found them all standing there. He sighed in relief.

Draco narrowed his eyes and marched over to him. When Quigley walked out of the train, he said, "Keep moving, Quigley."

Noticing the look on Draco's face, Quigley was quick to obey.

Theo looked at him and frowned. "I only took my eyes off of her for a second."

"Yes, well, that's all it takes, isn't it? She walked right fucking past him, Theo," he said through clenched teeth. "For someone who wants me to trust him, you're sure doing a lousy job of proving yourself."

"I made one bloody mistake -"

"*One* mistake? All fucking day, you've been trying to make me look bad by reminding her of what a prick I used to be."

"*Used* to be? The two of you have only been shagging for like a month, Draco. Maybe you're doing the noble thing while she's here, but we both know the moment she's gone you're going to fall right back into old habits."

"That's not true!" Draco shouted while slamming his hand against the side of the train.

"Yes, it is! You're going to go back to your old life and she's going to end up heartbroken because she believes that whatever the fuck it is the two of you are doing is real."

"It is -"

"No, it's not!" Theo shouted. "You saved her, Draco. You saved her, she got confused over her feelings for her fucking hero, and you took advantage of that."

"I did not -"

"Yes, you did! I'd tell you more about how I feel, but your fucking regulations won't

let me. But I *can* say this. The two of you being together, it's fucking wrong, and nothing you do or say is going to change my mind about that."

Draco took several deep breaths through his nose, his eyes still glowering at Theo as he tried to keep his cool. Then, through clenched teeth, he slowly said, "It's. Fucking. Real."

"Whatever you say," Theo said coldly before walking towards the others.

Draco turned to see that Hermione had moved on to another stand. He began walking forward while keeping his eyes on her, not stopping until he hit the potions stand they had been at before. Looking down, Draco's eyes were immediately drawn to a black bottle. He picked it up and read the label. *Mortem Sibi Conscivit Venenum*. He gulped. Suicide potion.

"That has become one of our more popular items in recent days," said the shop boy with a disconcertingly bright smile on his face.

"How much?" Draco asked.

"Seventy Galleons," he answered. "Dying peacefully and painlessly don't come cheap."

Draco grunted before handing over the money. He slipped the potion into his bag before Hermione could look over and notice. When he turned to leave, he ran right into someone passing by.

"Sorry," they said while rubbing at their head.

When their eyes met, both sets widened as they were hit with that moment of recognition. *Shit.*

"Longbottom?" said Draco, still unsure if he was seeing his old schoolmate's face correctly. Neville was very active with the resistance, and there was no way in hell he could have been hiding in the city for all of this time without the Death Eaters finding out. Unless one of them was helping him, which he highly doubted. Which meant only one thing. Neville had sneaked in.

Without another moment of hesitation, Neville took off running. Draco could have grabbed him. *Should* have grabbed him. Bound him right there and pulled him into a private compartment in the train so that he could explain everything and use him to help get Hermione out of the city. Being a Death Eater, it was in his jurisdiction to do just that.

But he didn't.

Instead Draco just let Neville go, watching him disappear into the crowd while he did nothing more than stand there. Because he was not ready to enlist help, not if that meant he would have to let Hermione go. It was too soon.

And then, once Neville was out of view, the guilt kicked in and Draco felt horrible. He could have gotten her out. Maybe today. But he had chosen not to for his own selfish reasons.

Just then, he felt a pair of hands grab onto his arm. He turned to see Hermione's altered face smiling at him. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Draco nodded before letting her drag him away, watching in disappointment as she, once again, grabbed onto Bronson's hand. He sighed. Things could never be the way he wanted between them. Not in this world. But, at least now, he had his escape for the day she left, hopefully taking that fucker Rodolphus and several others with him.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Later that evening, Draco lay on the bed, using Hermione's breasts as a pillow while enjoying their post-coital bliss. She giggled as he gave one of them a kiss, then grabbed his head and pulled it up until his lips were against hers.

"Thank you again for today," she said while stroking her hand through his hair. "I know you hated it but I really needed the escape. It felt good to be in the real world again."

"I don't know if the Black Market really qualifies as the real world, but I'm glad you enjoyed it." He paused. "But never again."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Oh, fine." Continuing to run her fingers through his blond locks she asked, "So are you going to tell me what Rodolphus was doing there?"

"I'd rather not."

"Did it have something to do with me?"

He frowned and nodded.

"Then I should know."

Draco sighed. He knew she was right, but that did not make it any easier. "He was purchasing Amortentia. A shit load of it. I think he plans to try and run away with you if they capture you again."

Hermione froze. Her hand tensed in his hair, clutching to it tightly while her eyes became wide and fear stricken. "That's … sick," was all she was able to say.

"He's sick," said Draco. "But … there was a positive twist to all of this."

"How can there be a positive twist on anything when there's a man out there who wants to essentially drug me into loving him for as long as he can? That is, until we're both captured and executed."

Draco grazed his fingers across her cheek and smirked. "Well, he gave me his crest for my silence, and then told me some useful information for obtaining the others."

"Oh," Hermione said, her tone suddenly brightening. "That *is* positive." She smiled.

"I'm not going to let them capture you, Hermione," said Draco before leaning down and giving her a kiss. "Don't let anything that bastard does worry you."

Before Hermione could say anything, there was a knock at the front door.

Draco groaned.

"That's probably Bronson," said Hermione. "He had me put a few of the things he purchased in my bag and I forgot to give them back to him when we got home."

Draco found himself suddenly feeling very light at the sound of her words. She had called his flat 'home'. He tried not to smile too much.

"I'll go get rid of him," said Draco before pressing his lips to hers. "Then another round?"

Hermione rolled her eyes but she did not object.

Draco winked and kissed her one more time before getting up and locating his trousers. He pulled them on, going commando since he did not plan to wear them for very long.

There was another knock as Draco left the bedroom. "I'm fucking coming!" he called before shutting the bedroom door. Bronson might have been gay, but that did not give him free reign to see Hermione naked. Only Draco could do that.

Just as Draco reached the front door, the person knocked again.

"Did I not say I was fucking coming?" he shouted while yanking it open. His eyes widened when he saw Astoria Greengrass looking slightly taken aback on the other side.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you," she said. Her eyes began scanning him up and down, only then reminding him that he was shirtless.

"What the fuck are …" Draco gulped and started again, this time without the cursing. His mother raised him better than that. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, you have not returned any of my owls, so I had to draw the conclusion that either you were lying dead and decomposing in your flat, or you were ignoring me. I am afraid to say that it appears to be the latter."

Draco smirked. "No offense," he said while crossing his arms.

"None taken. Would you mind terribly if I came in?"

Before Draco had a chance to say no, Astoria was walking past him and taking off her cloak. She handed it to him and, noticing the shoes by the door, she quickly took hers off and put them beside his.

"Make yourself comfortable," Draco said scornfully while tossing her cloak over the nearest chair. He did not want to give her the impression that she was going to be here for very long by hanging it in his closet. "You don't take a hint very well, do you?"

"Well, if your father owled you three times a day asking if you had seen *me* yet, you might be a little more persistent. All I'm asking for is five minutes, Draco, just to get him off my back."

Draco groaned before shutting the door.

Astoria smiled and crossed her arms. "You know, you are much more polite when my father's around. What happened to that overly charming wizard I ran into on the street less than two months ago?"

"*Overly*? I have just the right amount of charm, sweetheart."

"Believe what you want but, from a woman's perspective, you lay it on a little thick." Astoria walked towards the kitchen. "Do you have anything to drink?" She began looking through the cabinets.

"I really wish you would stop making yourself so comfortable."

She came out with a bottle of mead and smiled triumphantly. Then she grabbed two glasses. "Now, Draco, is that any way to speak to your future wife?"

Draco went white.

"Don't make that surprised face, I *know* you know. That is why you have been ignoring me, isn't it?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I would be ignoring you even if I hadn't heard the terrible rumors."

"You could do worse. In fact, didn't you used to date Pansy Parkinson?" Astoria smirked almost wickedly.

"I'm not fucking marrying anyone." So much for being raised right.

"Why not? Don't believe in it?"

"No interest," he said. "Especially when it's not even my fucking choice."

"Hmm …" Astoria opened the mead and poured it into the glasses. She handed one to Draco before chugging hers down. Then she poured some more. "I don't know why you care so much. It's all just for show, isn't it? Pureblood marrying pureblood. That's why my parents got married, after all. And I can only imagine that yours -"

"*My parents* actually loved each other," spat Draco. He chugged down his drink and slammed it on the counter.

Astoria poured him some more. "Maybe they did, but that does not change the fact that any initial romance between the two of them was because they were both purebloods."

"They didn't have an arranged marriage," he said. "They met in school, like normal fucking people."

"You and I met in school."

Draco sneered. "You know what I mean."

"I do," she said. Then, replaying the words in her head, she began to smile. "Oh, look, you already have me saying it."

"Not funny," said Draco, making sure to sip instead of chug his drink this time.

"It was a little funny."

"I don't understand why you're pushing this. You should be as repulsed by our fathers' primitive ways as I am."

Astoria frowned before chugging another glass. While pouring some more, she said, "Look, Draco, let me level with you. Next week, the Dark Lord is putting his mark on my arm. I know this is hardly shocking but, while I may be many things, ruthless is not one of them. I will make an absolutely horrible Death Eater. But my father says if I marry you and have a child, then I won't have to perform the usual duties that come with being a Death Eater. So, in layman's terms, you're my out." She chugged another glass.

"I'm not marrying you."

"Why the fuck not?" Astoria shouted while slamming her glass on the counter.

"Because I don't want to."

"And why don't you want to? Do you think I'm unattractive?"

"No."

"Do you find me annoying?"

"In this present moment, yes. But, otherwise, no."

"Do you think you would be absolutely miserable with me for the rest of your life?"

Draco gulped and glanced towards his bedroom door. "Yes."

Astoria's eyes began to water. "Why?"

"Because."

"I need more than just 'because', Draco! Why can't you be at least moderately happy with me?"

"Because …"

"Because *why*?"

"Because I already fucking have someone!" he shouted, while turning his flaming

eyes towards her. Then they widened. *Shit.*

Astoria's jaw dropped. "You do?"

Draco held his lips shut tight and bit his cheek.

"But I … I thought you were a ladies man?"

He sighed. "I was," he said weakly.

Suddenly, Astoria's eyes drew to something behind him. Draco turned to see Hermione's bag on the coffee table.

"Oh, Merlin, she … she's here, isn't she? That's why you're bloody shirtless … Oh, shit." Astoria let go of her glass and ran towards the door. She grabbed her cloak off of the chair and swiftly fastened it around her shoulders while slipping on her shoes. "I am so sorry, Draco. I … I really didn't realize." She reached for the knob.

"Astoria."

She turned and looked at him.

Looking at her seriously, Draco said, "Don't tell anyone about this. If anybody knows that I -"

"I know," she said, looking back at him sadly. "Your secret is safe with me. But, Draco, I … I don't think this is going away."

"Don't worry about that," he said, suddenly thinking about the potion that was still in his bag. "And about being a Death Eater … as long as I'm in charge, I'll take care of you. There will be no blood on your hands."

Astoria sucked in her lips and nodded. "Thank you," she said before glancing back at his bedroom door. "Draco … please just tell me it's not Pansy in there."

Draco chuckled and shook his head. "Fuck no."

Managing a smile, Astoria said, "Good," before opening the door. "Night, Draco."

As soon as she was gone, Draco took several deep breaths before returning to his bedroom. Hermione was sitting up in the bed with the covers held up above her chest. When she looked at him, she tried really hard not to smile.

"Sorry about that," he said before taking off his trousers and climbing in beside

her.

"So … does this make me your mistress?" she asked as he wrapped his arms around her.

"As far as I'm concerned, *she* is the other woman. Not you."

Giving into her smile, Hermione reached up and stroked his cheek. "So you have someone, do you?"

Draco smiled back and said, "Yeah. I believe I do."

Hermione kissed him then, the two of them falling back on the bed before hastily beginning another round.

When it was over, Draco was quick to fall asleep while Hermione rested her head on his chest, carefully listening to his heartbeat. She did not have the nerve to say it, but she wished there was some other way to let Draco know how she felt. That he was not the only one who had someone. She had someone too, and she was pretty sure if he ever ended up marrying someone else, even if forced, that her heart would be broken.

# Chapter 16: Tell Me Why

**A/N: So, for all of you have read my other Draco/Hermione stories, sidebar please - I find myself wishing that my OC Sophie was in this story because I am pretty sure she and Bronson would be AMAZING together. But I refuse to go back to that damn French dialect! Haha! *Sigh***

**Prepare the tissues! That's all I'm saying … }:o)**

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"Bronson, could you stop please?" said Hermione as she started to pull away from him.

"Why?" he asked, crinkling his nose as he lowered his wand.

"I don't know, I just … I'm starting to have second thoughts about all of this."

"Why?" he asked again. "You said you wanted to do something to make Malfoy happy and we both agreed that this is the best -"

"I know!" she shouted. "But I just don't think I'm ready!"

Hermione stood up from the toilet seat where she had been sitting while Bronson fiddled with her hair, trying to get it to cooperate for once. She pulled the robe she was wearing tightly around her body and cast her eyes shamefully to the floor.

"You probably aren't," said Bronson with a frown. "But will you ever be?"

Hermione looked up at him and gulped. "I don't know," she said dryly, "but I want to be."

"Then I think you need to be more forceful about it. You've been through a lot, Hermione, and you're not going to get past all of it by just sitting back and waiting to be healed. And if you're not going to just *tell* him how you feel …"

Hermione chuckled halfheartedly. "I don't know if I'll *ever* be ready for that."

"Well, could you at least tell *me* how you feel?" Bronson asked with a wide, tooth-baring grin.

Looking at him very seriously, Hermione reached her hand out and took his. "Bronson … I like you very much. As a friend." She smirked.

Bronson rolled his eyes and said, "Not what I meant."

"I know," she said, letting go of his hand. "But, the truth is, I don't know how to describe my feelings for Draco. There just … there are no words for it. Not the right ones, anyway." Hermione closed her eyes and took several deep breaths, images of Draco instantly flooding her mind. When she opened her eyes again, she immediately retook her seat on the toilet. "Okay, let's try this again."

With a smile, Bronson lifted his wand back up and went to work on her hair. Eventually he was able to get it to fall into loose but structured curls. Of course, it would have been much easier if Hermione had just done a spell to change her hair entirely, but she knew Draco would hate that. He liked her as is, which she still had a hard time understanding. It made absolutely no sense that he would want an average, scarred, damaged girl like her when he could have someone as picturesque and perfect as Astoria Greengrass.

Out of curiosity, Hermione had sent Bronson and Quigley out on a mission to get a photo of her. They had succeeded, of course, being the sneaky little devils they were. Unfortunately, Hermione quickly realized that she had not thought this plan all the way through. Seeing Astoria only made her feel even more insecure than she already did.

"She's got nothing on you," Bronson had said to make her feel better. "Her face is one in a million, but yours … you're one of a kind."

Hermione had momentarily felt better. That is, until Quigley asked if they thought Malfoy would mind if he shagged his future wife. Bronson had hit him particularly hard then.

While thoroughly studying her hair in the mirror, Hermione did not notice as Bronson left the washroom and headed into the bedroom. He came back a minute later waving around her lacy black and pink bra.

"Are you wearing this one?" he asked. "Because I remember Malfoy being particularly fond of it when we got it for you."

Hermione turned bright crimson before whipping around and grabbing it from him. "I don't know," she said. "I haven't really thought about it." That was a lie. Ever since Hermione had decided to do this, what she would wear had never left her mind. This particular bra had come up in it several times.

"Well, I think you should," he said, taking it back and holding it up to his own chest. "With some lacy black knickers. I know we got you some."

Hermione blushed brighter.

"Aw, after all of the time we've spent together, you're still so shy around me," said Bronson while giving her cheek a pinch.

Hermione batted it away. "Well, I don't see you telling me what you plan to wear the next time you try to seduce Theo."

Bronson smirked. "If I'm going to seduce anyone, I can assure you that I won't be wearing anything." He paused. "And who says there's going to be a next time?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione said, "Oh, please. You've been messing with him ever since he made it clear that *he* was not interested in a next time."

"Have I?" he said innocently.

"Yes, you have. And it seems to be working," she said, taking the bra back and going into the bedroom to put it in its drawer. "When we went to the Black Market the other day, it was so obvious that he was trying to get some sort of rise out of you that I'd be surprised if even Draco didn't notice."

Bronson chuckled. "Well, I wouldn't say he was trying to get a rise out of me. He was just trying to get me to pay attention to him."

Hermione cocked an eyebrow.

"Theo's not gay, Hermione, and I doubt he ever will be. He's just … lazy."

She crinkled her forehead. "What?"

"That night you saw in his mind." Of course she had told him about that, since she had not felt right telling Draco and she had to talk to *someone* about it. "Until the moment he took off his clothes, did it seem like he was into me at all?"

Hermione blushed at the memory. "No. I guess not."

"Yeah, well, that's because he wasn't. But he was horny, and I was there and willing. He knew that and he used it to his advantage."

"His advantage?"

"Why do it yourself when you can have someone else do it for you?" Bronson winked. "The reason I've been 'messing with him', as you put it, is because I want to see how open he might be."

"I see … And just what conclusions have you drawn from this little experiment of

yours?"

"That he'd be open to a repeat performance. But I'm not sure he would ever be willing to return the favor, and that's a problem."

Hermione looked to the floor so he could not see her blush again.

Bronson laughed. "Your innocence is so fucking adorable, I can't even stand it. Does this mean *you've* never returned the favor?"

She did not answer.

"Well, if you do end up going through with this tonight then maybe you should start out with that. I can already tell you that Malfoy is a fan."

Hermione's eyes shot up, going excessively wide as her jaw fell to the floor.

"No, no, not like that!" Bronson said quickly. "He's just told me things. About his past girls, you know?"

Moving her eyes back to the floor, Hermione quietly said, "I wouldn't know what I was doing."

"And this is why you have me as a friend," he said with a bright smile. "Your little problem just happens to be my field of expertise."

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Hermione stood alone in the washroom, wearing nothing but her black and pink bra and lacy black knickers. She looked in the mirror at the face Bronson had painted on for her. He had kept it simple, having realized that Hermione looked best in her natural skin, but had made sure to give her bright pink lips to match the bra.

Letting out a deep sigh, Hermione tucked one of her curls behind her ear and walked into the bedroom. Draco would be home soon. She began pacing around, her hands fidgeting nervously as she waited, the clock in the living room ticking much slower than usual.

Hermione sat down on the bed to try and calm herself, her eyes immediately drawing to the large scar on her side. The one Pansy had given her. She wished she could get rid of this somehow, even if it was just for the night, but Bronson had tried with absolutely no luck.

Tracing the scar with her fingers, Hermione's eyes began to tear. Even though Draco never stared at any of her scars for too long, never grimaced, she was still always so aware of them. She didn't want to be. She wanted Draco to view her as flawless, but that would never happen.

Hermione had been so caught up in her scars that she completely missed the sound of the alarm on the fireplace signaling someone's arrival. The door to the bedroom clicked open and she jumped off of the bed, standing nervously in the middle of the floor as Draco walked in, his eyes widening at the sight of her.

"Hermione, what are you -?"

Hermione didn't let him finish. Sucking back her nerves, she took several hurried steps forward, wrapping her arms around Draco's neck and pulling his head down towards hers. She kissed him with more passion than she ever had before, he normally being the instigator of their more intense snogging sessions.

Quickly forgetting about why Hermione might be doing this, Draco let her tear off his jumper and shirt while he undid his trousers. He let them fall to the ground and had barely stepped out of them before Hermione was dropping to her knees, pulling down his boxer shorts in one fell swoop.

"Hermione, what are you -?" he started again, quickly shutting his mouth the moment he was engulfed in hers. "Holy shit."

His knees feeling weak, Draco fell back against the door, slamming it shut. Hermione shuffled right along with him, her mouth never stopping as it moved with a certain skillfulness he had not been expecting. He looked down and watched as her perfect, bright-pink lips stimulated him, his hand clenching tightly in her hair as he tried to hold onto his release.

She suddenly moved off of him and looked up. "Don't hold it back, Draco," she said before plunging onto him once more.

And so he didn't, letting her continue for several more minutes until he felt his release building up. He grabbed her hands off of his hips and pulled her to her feet, kissing her aggressively while she continued to pump his cock, not stopping until he was coming on her stomach.

Once he had a moment to catch his breath, Hermione kissed him softly before going over to the dresser and picking up her wand. She cleaned herself off, put it down and joined him by the door again, kissing him with as much passion as she had the moment he walked in the door.

Draco smirked as his arms wrapped around her waist. He picked her up and carried her over to the bed, tossing her into the center of it before climbing on after her, gently kissing up her thigh until he hit her black knickers.

"Your turn," he said while slowly pulling them off of her.

Draco discarded them to the side and quickly fell back into her, spreading her legs and lifting them over his shoulders before licking one delicate line up her slit. But that was the only gentleness she would be getting from here on out.

Engulfing his mouth on her clit, Draco began sucking aggressively, nibbling on her most sensitive spot while she tried to wriggle above him. But he held her still and, when she finally began to relax, he lifted one hand to play with her breasts while he plunged two fingers from his other into her burning core. Merlin, he fucking loved that warmth, his cock already growing hard again at the thought of entering it in a few short minutes.

It was not long before Hermione was on the edge, Draco biting down slightly harder on her clit to make her scream especially loud. He smiled triumphantly, knowing very well that she always liked that.

Hermione barely let her orgasm pass before she was pulling Draco up so he was level with her, kissing him again.

Draco moaned into her mouth. Knowing exactly where this was leading, he reluctantly pulled away, stopping her for just a moment to ask, "Is there any particular reason you're like this tonight? Not that I'm complaining!" he added quickly as her eyes began to drop. "But you being the aggressive one is not exactly usual."

Hermione looked deeply into his eyes while bringing her hand up to stroke his hair. She gulped and said, "You once told me that you were holding back for me, and I … I don't want you to do that tonight."

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Really?"

She nodded and, with all the confidence she could muster, said, "I'm ready."

Draco smiled as he cupped her face and kissed her. "Should we have a safety word?"

Hermione laughed. "Safety word? Are you planning to start whipping me or something?"

"Well, if you're into that sort of thing."

Hermione smiled shyly and shook her head.

Draco let out a dramatic sigh. "All right, fine. No props tonight. Just you and me. But, seriously, a safety word would not be such a terrible idea if -"

"Draco, no," she said, tracing her fingers down his face. "I don't need a safety word. I trust you."

He smiled again before kissing her tenderly. "Then let's start with something simple." Climbing off of her, Draco lifted Hermione and positioned her so her back was to him. With one quick flick of his wrist, her bra was off and discarded somewhere on the floor. "Put your hands on the headboard," he instructed.

Hermione did as she was told, suddenly feeling very nervous as Draco crawled up behind her. Until now, he had always been somewhat gentle with her, letting her keep a certain amount of control even when he was on top. But tonight was going to be different. This was the first time they would ever be doing this in a position where she could not look into his eyes if she needed to. Maybe a safety word was not such a bad idea ….

Then Draco's hand came up and moved her hair off of her neck, pressing his lips to it while he began to caress her hips. Hermione closed her eyes and let herself sink into his touch. She knew the feel of those lips, that tongue, those hands. They were Draco's and he would never do anything to harm her.

"Move back a little," he said while pulling on her waist.

Hermione did just that, letting herself relax as she felt his familiar member begin to enter her.

Draco started out slow, running his hands smoothly along her thighs and stomach while thrusting in and out of her, his lips never leaving her neck, her shoulders, her back as she slowly became putty in his hands.

Before long, Draco felt it was all right to quicken his thrusts, tightening his hold around her body while he pulled her into him, rubbing one hand in smooth circles along her clit while the other played with her bouncing breasts. He had already decided that he wanted to make her come as many times as he could tonight, and it seemed like number two was quickly approaching.

When it finally hit, Draco let Hermione fall down on all fours while he pounded her through it, not slowing once until it had passed, and even then it was just to switch

positions. He flipped her around and tossed her onto her back, holding her legs together and twisting them to the side. He pushed into her and immediately began thrusting hard, not giving her any time to adjust to this new, tighter position.

Before long, Hermione was coming again, grabbing Draco by the hair and flipping them so aggressively that they rolled right off of the bed. He let her ride him for a while before eventually picking her up by the arse cheeks and slamming her against the wall.

He pounded her so hard against it that Hermione was sure she would have scrapes and bruises. But, in that moment, she did not care, scratching her nails deep into his back and biting onto his shoulder as she was overcome with yet another orgasm.

"That's four," he said proudly before tossing her back onto the bed. "One more."

Draco wished he could give her more, but seeing her like this, naked, willing, desperate, hair tousled and covered in a thick sheen of sweat, he knew he could not last much longer. It was already becoming hard to hold it in but, he had to admit, he enjoyed the challenge. The longer he held back, the better it would feel in the end.

Hermione weakly lifted herself onto her elbows, watching him with the ferocious look of a lioness as he began to crawl towards her, dangling his lips teasingly above hers before finally sinking into them. While she was distracted, he grabbed her hips and thrust back into her, his speed steadily progressing until his hips were moving so fast, they were nothing but a blur between them.

The bed banged against the floorboards as he continued to pound into her, making her body writhe and moan beneath him in ways it never had before. Had the frame not been made of iron, Draco was sure that they would break it.

"Fuck! Draco!" Hermione screamed, swinging her arms back and grabbing hard onto the headboard.

Draco put his arms behind her knees and lifted her legs over his shoulders. Placing his hands beside hers, he used the headboard to brace himself while he thrust mercilessly into her.

Normally, when they were this close to the edge, Draco would scream out her name, but, at the current moment, he was clenching his teeth tightly shut in an attempt to hold himself back. If he lost any concentration then he was done, and he knew Hermione was not quite there yet. Just a little … bit … longer.

"DRACO!" she screamed as her fifth orgasm finally washed over her, her body tensing and then falling weak as he gave two final thrusts.

Draco let out his own scream, along with a heavy breath he did not know he was holding in as he came inside of her. His body finally began to slow as Hermione ran her hands along his arms, rubbing them soothingly as he lowered her legs, giving her body one last caress before pulling out of her.

Even though Draco and Hermione were both still out of breath, they managed to meet for a soft kiss as his body slackened on top of hers. Draco kissed her lips, her cheek, her forehead, jaw, neck, collarbone, anywhere he could touch, yet, somehow, it was never enough.

"So what did you think?" he asked once they'd had a moment to catch their breath.

Hermione looked up at him and smiled. "Well, now I know why those girls you brought here always screamed so loudly," she said with a slight chuckle.

"I assure you, it has never been quite like that," he said while kissing her again. "That was -"

"Amazing," she finished.

Draco grinned and shook his head. "No. I've had amazing sex before, and that was beyond amazing, love. That was phenomenal."

Hermione blushed beneath him. Draco was not sure why until he replayed his words in his head. He had called her 'love'. It was a complete accident, but one he hardly felt ashamed about.

Draco began tracing her lips with his thumb, tempted to say the word again. "Hermione, I -"

Suddenly, there was a knock at his bedroom door. Both of their eyes shot towards it.

"Draco, if you are quite finished in there, I would like to have a word with you," called a familiar, drawling voice.

*Shit.*

"Did I ever scream your name?" Draco asked in a panic while Hermione's fingers dug into his arms.

"N-no," she answered in a weak, terrified voice.

"Good," he said, reaching down and pulling the comforter up from where it had fallen on the floor. He threw it on top of her. "Stay here. I'll get rid of him."

Draco kissed her forehead before climbing off of the bed and searching the room for his clothes. He hurried and got dressed, looking back at her one last time before opening his door the smallest of cracks and slipping out of it.

In the living room, his guest had made himself comfortable on the sofa and was flipping through the pages of *Hogwarts: A History*. Why did everyone always grab that fucking book?

"Father, what are you doing here?"

Without turning to look at him, Lucius said, "Is it not customary for a father to come and visit his son when he is in town?"

"All right, let me clarify. *Why* are you in town?"

"The Dark Lord sent for me," he said while shutting the book and putting it down on the coffee table. "He is worried about you. Everyone is."

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Are they?"

Lucius stood up and turned to face his son. "Yes. They say that you have not been yourself lately. Do you have any idea as to why they might think that?" he asked, his eyes glancing slightly towards Draco's bedroom door.

"No," said Draco. "If I am acting unusually, it is only because I am being cautious. Your old friends have made it very clear that they no longer want me in power, and I do not plan on letting them usurp my position anytime soon."

"What is that?" asked Lucius, his eyes widening. "Draco, if someone has threatened you then I have a right to -"

"It is nothing I cannot handle, Father. Don't worry yourself too much or you might get wrinkles." Draco pointed at his forehead and made a face.

"This is no laughing matter," said Lucius while walking towards his son, clutching tightly onto his magical cane, which was still ornamented with its signature silver snake's head. "If those people have it out for you then it is only a matter of time until -"

"While they may have it out for me, Father, it is not my life they are threatening," said Draco.

Lucius stiffened.

"Do not concern yourself with this. Just make sure to watch your back when alone in the manor." Draco smirked. "Are we done yet?"

"Not even close," drawled Lucius. "I have been informed that Astoria Greengrass came to see you the other evening. Her father insists that she was dead set on becoming your bride before then but, for some reason, she seems to have changed her mind."

Draco shrugged. "So?"

"What did you say to her, Draco?"

He shrugged again. "Nothing really. Just that I had no interest."

"Why not?"

"Marriage isn't really in the cards for me."

"Well, I am afraid it is going to have to be."

"Nope," said Draco.

Realizing he was standing a bit protectively in front of his bedroom door, Draco decided that it might be best to move away from it, so as not to arouse suspicion. Feeling his cigarettes in his pocket, he headed for the balcony. He kept the door open and leaned against the railing, keeping a sharp eye on his father as he took out a cigarette and lit it.

"It has also come to my attention recently that you cut Pansy Parkinson out of your life in a very cruel fashion."

Draco smirked as he took a drag of his cigarette. "Why should that matter?"

"Other Death Eaters say you have been going out less. And that, in recent days, you have not been seen with your usual array of women."

"I don't see how my personal life has anything to do with -"

"Who is in your bedroom, Draco?"

Draco tensed. "What?"

"Is it someone of importance to you?"

"Of course not."

"Because if it is -"

"It's not!" Draco shouted a bit too eagerly. He took another drag of his cigarette to calm himself. "I am not going to lie, Father, I have my usual's, and the girl in there is one of them, but that does not mean that she is someone of importance to me."

"Good," said Lucius, walking towards the balcony door. "Because falling for someone in these present times would be very foolish of you."

Draco took a deep breath and said, "I know."

"I truly believe that you should rethink the offer presented to you by Ms. Greengrass. She would make a fine wife, and since you have no existing feelings for her -"

"Are you actually telling me to marry someone because I *don't* have feelings for them?" asked Draco, pursing his eyebrows.

"Marrying for love only complicates things."

Feeling his throat going raw, Draco gulped to relieve it. "You did," he said slowly.

"Yes, and look how I turned out," said Lucius, looking sadly at his son before heading for the fireplace.

Draco put his cigarette out and followed him.

"Tend to your guest," said Lucius. "The Dark Lord has asked me to stay until the New Year so we will be able to continue this discussion at a later date."

"So will you be reporting to me while you're here?" asked Draco.

"Looks like it," said Lucius with a faint smile. "I will see you soon."

Taking a handful of Floo powder, Lucius tossed it into the fireplace and stepped inside, quickly disappearing to the Dark Lord's manor.

Draco stood there for a moment, staring at the flames while he thought about the truth behind Lucius's words. His father had loved his mother, and when she had

died it seemed that she had taken a part of him with her. Lucius had never been the same after that day, which was perhaps why Draco loathed him so much. For letting it break him. But now Draco was starting to understand what he must have felt. A world without Hermione just did not seem right, which was why he did not plan to live in it for very long.

Finally tearing his eyes away from the fire, Draco walked back towards his bedroom. When he opened the door, Hermione was running around in a panic, dressed messily in normal clothes while she threw everything she could find into her small bag.

"Hermione."

Her head shot up and she looked at him, her eyes filled with tears as her cheeks flushed a horrible red.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I … I need to leave. If he's here then -"

"He's not here, Hermione. He left."

Hermione shook her head frantically. "No, no. Not *here.*" She pointed at the floor. "In the city. He's … He's staying. He'll be back. He'll -"

"Hermione, calm down," said Draco, walking over to her and putting his hands on her shoulders.

She flinched.

Draco pulled away, his heart sinking as his old suspicions began to arise in him once more. "You're being irrational. I will make sure he never comes back here. I promise." He reached out to stroke her cheek. "I -"

"Draco, NO!" Hermione took several hurried steps back from him. "There have been too many close calls lately! It's not safe for me here anymore!"

Draco took a step towards her, so she took one back. This repeated until she was all the way against the wall. Tears poured down her cheeks while he looked sadly at her. She knew what was coming. She had brought it on herself. But how could she act normal when *that man* had been so incredibly close to her?

"Hermione, I need you to be honest with me," said Draco, standing close but not touching her, even though he desperately wanted to. "I … I've been afraid to ask

before now, but I just … I need to know."

Hermione whimpered, scared to look into his eyes but unable to look away. A shade lighter with a light-blue ring around the pupil. Draco's eyes. Draco … She reached out and grabbed his hand.

Feeling her hand enter his, Draco feared that he already knew the answer, but he had to ask. "Did my father ever …" He gulped. "Did he ever touch you, Hermione? Did he … did he rape you?" he asked in an almost whisper, his voice hoarse as she began to sob louder.

Hermione did not answer. She just continued to cry while squeezing tighter onto his hand. Draco reached up and wiped her eyes.

"Hermione, please," he pleaded, his eyes becoming glossy as she kept staring back at him.

With a loud sob, Hermione slowly began to nod. Draco's tears finally spilled over. His eyes clenched shut as his fingers began to tense on her face.

"Merlin, no," he cried as his whole body began to shake. "Please, fucking no!"

"Draco, I … I'm sorry," Hermione said as his forehead fell against hers. "I meant to tell you. I did. I just …"

"It's not your fault," said Draco, shaking his head while his hand moved into her hair, clutching it hard as he tried with everything he had not to lose control. "I should have known. I … I saw the signs, Hermione. I even suspected it in the beginning. The way you always looked at me after your nightmares. But … I didn't want it to be true."

"Neither did I," she said, leaning forward just enough to brush her lips against his.

"Please, don't," said Draco, pulling away from her. "How can you look at me? How can you be with me when I look so much like him?"

"Because I don't see him when I look at you, Draco," she said, tears still falling endlessly from her eyes. "Not anymore. You're … you're not like him."

"Yes I am," he said, yanking his hand out of hers. "I am exactly like him, Hermione. I … I pushed you into this."

Hermione shook her head wildly. "No. No, you didn't."

"Yes I did! You didn't want to so I tricked you and forced you into this!"

"No, that's not true!" she screamed. "I wanted to be with you! I -"

"I fucking forced you, Hermione! I FORCED YOU TO BE WITH ME! Just like him!"

"You … you would never -"

"But I did! You were vulnerable and I didn't care! I fucking took what I wanted anyway! I *knew*! Deep fucking down I knew that my father raped you and I fucked you anyway!"

Hermione went white, her whole body feeling heavy as he slowly stepped away from her. "Draco, please." She reached out for him but he only pulled away again.

"I'm selfish. I'm so fucking selfish that I chose not to see. But I can't be selfish when it comes to you, Hermione. Not anymore."

Draco looked up and stared deeply into her eyes, the whites of them terribly bloodshot while her amber irises were hidden behind two heavy streams of tears. He hated seeing her like this, his face tensing as he tried to stop his own tears from falling.

His throat feeling incredibly dry, somehow Draco still managed to say, "I saw Longbottom at the Black Market the other day. There is no way he could have been there without sneaking into the city, and I could have grabbed him. He was right there and I could have grabbed him and taken him somewhere private. I could have told him about you and gotten you out, but I didn't. I didn't because I wasn't ready to give you up yet. You could be with Potter and Weasley right now, but you're not because I'm selfish."

Hermione gaped at him for a moment before gulping and saying, "You … you saw Neville?"

Draco looked ashamedly to the ground and nodded. "I'm sorry. But I won't fail you again." He looked up into her eyes once more. "I'm getting you out."

Hermione started to take a step forward, but stopped when Draco took a step back. She began to cry harder. "Draco, please. This … this is why I didn't want to tell you. You're already looking at me differently."

"How can I not?" he said, his heart sinking as she looked at him so desperately. "I just … I need some air." He started to head for the door but quickly stopped. "If I go, will you still be here when I get back?"

Hermione whimpered and nodded. "Should I … should I move back into the guestroom?"

Draco tried to say yes, but found himself shaking his head instead. "I don't want you to, but if that's what you -"

"I want to stay with you," she said.

"Then stay," he said. "I'll be back shortly."

Without waiting for a response, Draco left the room and headed for the front door. He slipped on his cloak and shoes, stopping for a moment to punch the wall with all he had, not caring that he hit it so hard his knuckles started to bleed. He needed to hurt something and his father was not fucking here.

Feeling himself losing control, Draco reached for the doorknob, but he had barely touched it when his eyes drifted over to the fireplace. He did not really feel like being alone right now, but he knew he could not stay here with her since he was only moments away from breaking. As much as it pained him to admit it, there was only one other person he felt comfortable enough around to see him like this.

Taking a deep breath, Draco headed for the fireplace and threw in a handful of Floo powder. He stepped into the green flames and said, "Nott Residence," before quickly being sucked away.

When he arrived in the Notts' drawing room, Theo's father, Quincy, was sitting in his armchair, drinking some brandy by the fireplace.

"Ah, young Malfoy. Do what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Obviously I'm not here for you, you sick fuck," said Draco before marching off towards Theo's bedroom.

When he got there, Theo was lying on the bed, his head hanging over the edge with a half-drunken bottle of firewhiskey in his hands. He looked at him upside-down.

"Evening, Draco. Do what do I owe the pleasure?"

Draco grunted. "Like father, like fucking son," he said, shutting the door behind him. He walked over and tore the bottle out of Theo's hands, taking several large gulps while Theo watched in amazement. By the time he came up for air, the bottle was pretty much empty. "Why the fuck are you drinking here? Why aren't you out finding a slag or something?"

Theo sat up and took the bottle back in disappointment. "Well, you see, the bastard I used to go drinking with all the time recently fell for this girl, and I haven't really seen much of him since. Not unless she's there too, and she can't exactly come out drinking with us."

"I doubt I've been that fucking bad."

Theo raised his eyebrows.

Draco grunted. "All right, fine. I've been an arse, but you don't have to fucking worry about that now because it's over." He winced at the words, drinking that last bit of firewhiskey to stop himself from breaking down right there.

"Really?"

Suddenly, Theo froze and stared at his door. He jumped up and walked over to it, throwing it open with such a force that Quincy nearly toppled over.

"Is there something you needed, Father?"

"Uhh, no," said Quincy, turning very pale. "Draco seemed a bit distressed when he came through just now and I thought I would see if everything is all right."

"Everything is fine," said Theo, slamming the door in his father's face and putting a Silencing Charm, as well as several Lock Charms on it. "So why is it over?" asked Theo once that was taken care of. "You finally smuggle her out of the city or something?"

"No," said Draco, his eyes becoming glossy as he took a seat on the bed. "She's still here."

"Then what -?"

"It's my fucking father." Just the mention of Lucius was enough to make Draco's tears spill over. He wiped at them. "He … he raped her. He fucking raped her, Theo."

Theo gaped at him. "She told you that?"

Draco nodded. "After I asked. My father came by because the Dark Lord has summoned him here and, after he left, she began acting crazy. I suspected it before but I … I didn't really want to know."

"Why not?"

After taking several deep breaths, Draco sadly looked at his friend and said in a slow, dry voice, "Because I'm in love with her."

Theo's eyes widened in surprise. He quickly looked off to the side. Well, this was awkward.

"I'm fucking in love with her, Theo. I've *been* in love with her but I … I don't know what to fucking do now. This … changes everything. I want to kill my father for what he did to her. I want him fucking dead! I want them all fucking dead for ever thinking they could touch her and get away with it! I want them *all* to suffer!"

Theo smirked at the floor. "Well, it's good to see you're still as cold as ever."

"You were right before," said Draco. "When you said I took advantage of her. I didn't think I did but …" He gulped. "… but what girl in her right mind would ever want to be with the son of a man who raped them unless pushed? I pushed her into this, Theo. When I first started feeling something for her, I knew she felt it too, but she kept denying it, so I pushed. I pushed her to the point of pinning her against a fucking wall and holding her there until she admitted that she wanted me."

"Sounds kinky."

"It's not fucking kinky!" shouted Draco. "It's sick! I'm sick!"

Theo took a deep breath before going over and sitting next to Draco on the bed. They sat there awkwardly for a moment before he lifted his arm and began patting Draco on the back, nearly knocking him forward.

"What are you doing?" asked Draco.

"Being comforting," answered Theo, continuing to pat.

"Well, you're doing a lousy fucking job."

"Yeah, well, I've never had to do this before so you're going to have to deal." Theo stopped patting him and put his hand in his own lap. "For what it's worth, I was pissed the other day. I don't *actually* think you're taking advantage of her. Not from what I've seen, anyway."

"You don't?" Draco asked hopefully.

"No," said Theo. "Don't get me wrong, what the two of you are doing is fucking twisted. But, you know, the whole bloody world is fucking twisted right now, so it's

kind of hard to place any proper judgment on you two."

Draco chuckled halfheartedly.

Theo smiled. "So … you're really in love with her, mate?"

With a shallow nod, Draco said, "Yes."

"Is it just, like, an amazing shag or something? Is that love?"

Draco smirked. "It's fucking mind-blowing, but it's not just that. It's everything. Just being around her makes me happier than I've ever been."

Theo crinkled his nose. "This is weird."

"I know," said Draco with a sigh.

"Draco Malfoy with feelings. Never thought I'd see the day."

"You and me both."

"It's kind of unsettling, isn't it?" asked Theo with a smile.

Draco smiled back and nodded. "I hate it."

As the two of them were overcome with a bit of an awkward silence, Theo opened the small cabinet beside his bed and took out a new bottle of firewhiskey. He popped it open and took a swig before handing it to Draco.

"When did you start hoarding this shit in your room?" asked Draco before taking a large sip.

"When I found out my father wanted to kill me, and it started to get really uncomfortable drinking with him in the drawing room. It really puts a damper on things."

"Why don't you ask the Dark Lord if you can move into your own place in the city? He offered a few years back, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I'm trying not to look suspicious, remember? You're the one who ordered me to act this way and I must obey," Theo said scornfully.

Draco handed him back the bottle and frowned. "It's not that I don't trust you, Theo."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Are you not the one who said I couldn't be trusted that night your girlfriend *tied me to a fucking chair*?"

"I didn't want to Imperius you. I didn't want you to be any fucking part of this, but, if you're going to be, it's safer this way."

"Safer my arse! You know I would never do anything to -"

"Safer for *you*," Draco said sternly. "You and I both know that Hermione's not getting out of here without some fucking shit blowing up in our faces first. I don't expect I'll survive this, Theo, and, when I don't, they'll come after you. At least if you're Imperiused they won't think you were a bloody spy or something. It's your safety net. Fucking embrace it."

Theo stared at Draco blankly for a moment before finally smirking. "So this is all for *my* benefit then? Fucking liar." He took a swig from the bottle.

Draco smirked back. "It's a partial truth," he said. "I do trust you, Theo. And Hermione told me what you did for her when she was a slave here. She told me what you've done for all of them. And the old woman with the knife …"

Theo tensed beside him.

"I … I used a Numbing Charm on her before I stabbed her, Theo. She didn't feel a thing. I promise."

Theo gulped and gave a shallow nod, but he did not say anything. Because, he knew if he did, he would no longer be able to hold back the tears he was currently fighting.

Just then, a bright streak of lightning shot through the sky outside of Theo's window. With the Silencing Charm around the room, Draco could not hear the thunder, but he was sure it was there.

"Shit," he said. "I didn't know there was going to be a thunderstorm tonight."

"Why does that matter?" asked Theo.

"Hermione's afraid of it." Draco shot up from the bed. "I shouldn't have fucking left her alone in the first place. Just more proof that I'm a selfish prick."

"You won't hear any arguments from me," said Theo, taking another swig from the bottle. He swallowed hard. "But, for what it's worth, I don't think you should give up on this twisted fucking romance of yours just yet. Your father's a bastard. You've

known this your entire life. And I kind of like this lovelorn Draco. You've been pretty fucking miserable since the war. At least now you're mildly happy, which is more than I can say for me."

With a faint smile, Draco said, "We'll get you out of this fucking house, Theo. But, for now, just stay out of your father's way."

"Yeah, yeah," said Theo, waving him off as he fell back on the bed. "Night, Malfoy. Go protect your girlfriend from the big, bad thunder."

Draco flipped him off.

"I saw that."

"You were meant to."

After removing the Locking Charms on the door, Draco returned to the drawing room where Quincy was sitting once more. He watched in curiosity as Draco more-or-less ignored him before Flooing home.

When he got there, thunder was echoing loudly through his flat. He tore of his cloak and shoes and tossed them aside before hurrying to his bedroom, where found his bed bare of its comforter, the gentle sound of weeping coming from behind his washroom door.

Draco sighed before opening it and tiptoeing inside. He climbed into his large, round bathtub and slumped down next to the heap of blankets, swarming through them until he found the warm body he was seeking.

"Hi, Hermione," he said, lifting the comforter so he could see her face.

She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes and sniffled.

"Give me your wand."

Hermione lifted it with a shaky hand. Draco took it and cast a quick Silencing Charm before putting it on the floor.

"I'm sorry I left," he said as he wrapped his arms around her, finding comfort in the feeling of the oversized flannel pajamas she loved to wear so often.

"I-it's okay," she said, whimpering as she buried her head into his shoulder. "I understand why you're mad at me."

"Is that what you think?" he asked while stroking her hair out of her face. "That I'm mad at you?"

"Aren't you? For … for me not telling you -"

"You shouldn't have to have told me, Hermione. I should have known. But I just …" Draco gulped. "I don't understand when it happened. My father's never owned a slave. I would have known if he -"

"I was never his slave, Draco. Malfoy Manor is just where they kept me in the beginning. Before Bellatrix created the slave trade."

"They kept you there? While I still lived there?"

Hermione nodded. "They kept me in the cellar. I could hear your voice sometimes. Once I even heard as You-Know-Who tortured you."

Tears began to fill Draco's eyes as he continued to gaze down at her. "Hermione, if I … if I had known -"

"It doesn't matter," she said, clenching her eyes shut and letting several more tears fall.

"And my father, did he … did he take advantage of you often?"

Hermione slowly shook her head. "Only once."

If there was ever a moment to tell Draco more, she knew that this was it. But, for some reason, the words never came. She did not have the courage to tell him that his father had been the first, because she could already feel him pulling away from her, and that was something her heart could not bear.

Draco closed his eyes and pressed their foreheads together, his tears dripping down his cheeks and onto hers. "I'm so sorry, Hermione. I wish I could have saved you sooner," he said in a faint whisper.

"I'm just grateful that you're here with me now," she said, clenching her fingers into the sides of his jumper. "And I know I should be angry with you about Neville but I … I'm just not. Because I'm not ready to leave you either."

Draco cried harder as he pulled her even tighter against him. "It's not fair," he said. "It's not fucking fair."

Hermione did not have to ask him what he meant, because she already knew.

Everything was not fair. The feelings they had, the short time they were given to share, the horrible realties that would always try to keep them apart. Life was not fair. And the cruel world they currently lived in was not making it any easier.

# Chapter 17: You Know What To Do

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Draco sat at the Dark Lord's table, unable to focus as his eyes constantly drifted to his father sitting on the other side about halfway down. Lucius kept catching his son staring at him, his eyebrows creasing in curiosity at the look of contempt he was receiving.

"How reliable would you say your source is?" asked Voldemort, staring down the table at Rabastan.

"Very reliable, my lord. They have never been wrong before."

"And you *do* realize this will be taking you to the very same place where you had that embarrassing display last year?"

Rabastan blushed. "I … I do, my lord. But I trust -"

"Draco."

Draco removed his eyes from his father and looked at the Dark Lord.

"You will take the lead on this."

Rabastan's nostrils flared.

Draco looked at him and smirked. "Of course, my lord."

"Choose your team."

"Well, I think it would only be fair to have Rabby along with me."

His eyes narrowing, Rabastan said, "Do *not* call me -"

"And who else?" interrupted Voldemort. "Perhaps your father -"

"No, my lord," Draco said quickly, glancing at Lucius out of the corner of his eye. He was still unsure of what to do about his father and, since he was planning on setting up a deathtrap on this mission, it simply was not the place for him. "His skills are better suited here. "I will also take Theo," for backup, "Roddy," he winked at Rodolphus, "Carrow, Macnair, Crabbe and the older Goyle." A good mix.

"Would you not like to bring more of your peers?"

Draco groaned. "I suppose Parkinson can come, as well." Draco knew he had a soft spot for Pansy because of their history together, but she had hurt Hermione too, and he could never forget that.

"I will also send Greyback and a few of his werewolves with you. They have been thirsting for blood recently." Voldemort smiled, giving Draco that creepy feeling he always got at the sight of those weird, mutated lips. "You will all leave first thing in the morning. Everyone is dismissed."

Draco stood up first, as he always did, and motioned for Theo to follow him. He had barely stepped out of the room before someone grabbed his shoulder. He turned to see his father.

"Draco, I was hoping you and I could speak over dinner and -"

Draco pulled away from Lucius and took several steps back. "Don't fucking touch me," he said with disdain.

Lucius cocked an eyebrow. "Is there a problem, Draco?"

Draco wanted to shout at him, "You fucking raped the girl I'm in love with!" but he knew how important it was to hold his tongue in front of their current crowd. So, instead, he said, "No, Father. None at all."

"Then why have you been looking at me like you want to rip me apart all evening?"

Because he did. "I do not believe I have."

Lucius began studying his son. "Draco, what is -?"

"Ready?" asked Theo, walking up to them and looking at Draco anxiously.

Glancing around, Draco noticed that they had an audience. It seemed he always did. "One moment, Theo." He looked back at his father. "I am afraid I have already made other arrangements tonight. Another time. Let's walk, Theo," he said, heading for the front door.

"So … where are we going?" Theo asked once they were outside.

"I need to get a message to someone. You're my lookout."

"Let me guess. I'm going to have to be extra cautious tomorrow."

"You should always be extra cautious, Theo."

"And *you* should be a little more discrete with those death stares you're giving your father."

"Well, I can't help that," said Draco. He suddenly perked up his ears. "So who is it that has decided to follow us?"

"That Rabastan fucker, as always," said Theo, always good at spotting those sorts of things by the simple sounds that people made while walking. "And Crabbe and Goyle."

Draco groaned. "Bronson works a couple blocks from here. We can duck into his kitchen and slip out the back. He has let me do it before."

Theo tried not to let Draco see him grimace as he slowly nodded.

Draco led the way around a few twists and turns, eventually stopping in front of a busy Italian restaurant.

"He works here?" asked Theo as Draco pushed through the waiting crowd and headed for the door.

"Yes," he said. "Ever been?"

"Brought a few of my usual slags here to keep them happy before." He paused. "So all of this time I could have gotten a free fucking meal?"

Draco glanced over his shoulder at him and smirked. "Guess so."

He opened the door and they headed inside, the pretty hostess looking up from her chart and smiling at them as they walked towards her.

"Oh, hello. You're Bronson and Zander's friend, aren't you?"

"Zander?" asked Theo, cocking an eyebrow.

"Quigley," said Draco, noticing Quigley walking by with several plates of food and nodding at him. "We need to see Bronson. It's important."

"Absolutely," she said, her smile broadening. "Give me just one second and I'll -"

"I'll take them," said another hostess popping up and giving them a smile to rival her coworkers.

"No, Jenna. *I'll* take them. You stay here."

Jenna glared at the other hostess as she left her station to lead Draco and Theo towards the kitchen, making sure to give Theo a wink as he passed her.

"So …" The hostess slowed her pace so she was walking side-by-side with Draco. "Has Bronson ever said anything about me?"

"*No*," Theo scoffed from behind them.

The girl frowned.

Inside of the kitchen, Draco immediately spotted Bronson, throwing ingredients into a pot while a male waiter whispered something incredibly close to him. Glancing sideways, Draco could not help but catch sight of the scowl on Theo's face. When he noticed Draco looking at him, he quickly pulled it back.

"Bronson!" the hostess called, not even seeming to notice the obvious flirting happening right in front of her. "Your friends are here."

Bronson looked over and smiled. "Ah, my two favorite Death Eaters."

Suddenly, the kitchen went very quiet.

"Do what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Nothing. We just need to slip out the back," said Draco.

"Being followed by those older pricks again."

"Always."

Bronson nodded. "Farrah, be a dear and make sure to keep any older Death

Eaters that walk in here busy, will you?"

The hostess nodded and blushed. She said, "Anything, Bronson," before slipping back out to the restaurant.

Looking at Bronson, Theo pursed his eyebrows.

Bronson smirked. "Women see what they want to see." He winked at the waiter, making him also blush before he grabbed a few plates and headed for the dining room.

"I believe you know your way to the back door, Malfoy," said Bronson, tossing them each a piece of some sort of bread off of a tray that had barely come out of the oven.

Theo sniffed it before taking a bite. His eyes immediately lit up. "Bloody hell."

"Focaccia," Bronson said with a smile. "I'll make it for you sometime." He winked and Theo blushed. It seemed that he brought out this reaction in a lot of people.

Draco pursed his eyebrows before heading for the backdoor. He and Theo slipped out and the two of them began heading for Diagon Alley, this time without any followers.

"Anything you want to fucking tell me, Theo?" Draco asked as they walked.

"Th'fuck you talking about?"

Guess that was a no.

When they got to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, Theo kept watch in the alley while Draco did his knock, having to wait a good minute before Oliver opened the door. At least he would not have to go through the hassle of Dennis letting him in today.

Oliver immediately led him upstairs and Andromeda stopped cooking dinner to go into the backroom with him.

"We're following a lead on the resistance to Godric's Hollow tomorrow," he said as soon as the door was closed. "I'm not sure of its validity of it but, either way, you should have members bombard us."

Andromeda blinked. "Will you be there?"

"Of course I will," said Draco. "I am the head on this mission."

She blinked again before casting her eyes to the floor. "I really wish you would let me tell them about you."

"No," he said quickly. "This is a war, Andromeda, and if someone from your side is captured, what is to stop them from supplying that information to bargain for their lives?"

"But someone might hurt you by accident," she said, looking up at him with worried eyes that reminded him of his mother's.

Draco sighed. "That's a risk I have to take."

"Well, I suppose if you insist on going on this mission, you might want to stop by the Potters' old home. I believe there is something of interest for you there."

Draco nodded in understanding. Then, his mind straying off topic, he suddenly remembered something. "There is something I need to ask you."

Andromeda waited.

"A few days ago, I spotted Neville Longbottom in the Black Market. Do you know anything about that?"

"No," she said with a shake of her head. "I have heard nothing of Neville being here. But I can ask. Surely, if he can get in -"

"You can get out," Draco said with a weak smile. He sighed again. "It looks like you're probably going to be here for Christmas."

Andromeda frowned. "Unfortunately, it does."

"So that … that person I can neither confirm nor deny has escaped."

She raised her eyebrows.

"If they have, and I knew where they were, it is possible that they have expressed an interest in seeing all of you. For Christmas."

"Oh," Andromeda said in surprise before giving him a bright smile. "So they can know about us, but we can't know about them?" She winked. "Well, you and whoever else are always welcome."

"And, if we did that, you wouldn't tell anyone on the outside -?"

"Not if you don't want me to," she said.

"Right. Good," said Draco with a nod. "We will discuss this more next week. For now, I need to be going."

Draco headed for the door and walked out to the main room, where every set of eyes was suddenly on him. Teddy ran over and he picked him up before reaching into his bag and pulling out the Wizard's Chess set he had purchased at the Black Market for them, as well as some Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans and Chocolate Frogs for Teddy, and some Cauldron Cakes for Cho, which she had once let slip was her favorite.

"Don't you dare fucking call it creepy," he said before heading for the stairs.

Andromeda followed him, taking Teddy from his arms as they reached the door.

"There's someone you should meet," said Draco. "In case something ever happens to me, there is another Death Eater on my side. I currently have him Imperiused for his own safety, but he's trustworthy even without it."

Andromeda went white and gulped.

"He's in the alley, but I won't call him in if you do not feel -"

"No. It's fine," she said. "If you trust him then I should do the same."

Draco nodded. He opened the door and looked outside, locating Theo leaning against the wall while poking his head around the corner. He whistled. Theo turned and he motioned for him to come over.

Once Theo got to the door, he looked at Andromeda and Teddy curiously.

"Theo, this is my aunt, Andromeda, and her grandson, Teddy. Members of the resistance."

Theo raised his eyebrows. "Your double life truly astounds me, Draco. It just keeps bloody growing, doesn't it?"

Draco smirked. "You have no idea."

Theo stared at Andromeda and pursed his lips. "You look a lot like your sister."

"Unfortunately, I hear that a lot," she said. "Teddy is just lucky he looks more like his grandfather."

Teddy smiled.

"My mum used to call me Teddy," said Theo, looking at the kid. "Before she passed. That's really the only thing I remember about her." He scratched his head.

"Passed?" asked Teddy.

Theo gulped and said, "Died."

"Oh." Teddy's face dropped. "My mommy passed too."

There was an awkward silence as it became very evident that everyone in this crowd was lacking a mother.

"We should go," said Draco. "I just wanted you two to meet. You know. In case."

Andromeda smiled and said, "Nice to meet you, Theo."

Draco stepped outside and she shut the door behind him.

"In case of what?" asked Theo as they walked back towards the street.

"I think you already know," answered Draco.

Neither of them said anything as they headed towards the Leaky Cauldron, grabbing a quick drink before Flooing to their different places of residence.

When Draco got home, Hermione was not in the front room like she normally was. He took off his shoes and cloak, and headed for the bedroom, where he found her passed out on the bed with a book lying open on her stomach. He smiled and took it off of her, carefully marking the page before changing and climbing in beside her.

It had only been three days since Draco found out about his father, and he and Hermione had not done so much as kiss since. Other than the occasional cheek peck. Even wrapping his arm around her now did not seem right, but it had become a habit that he really did not feel like breaking.

"You're late," she said quietly as he pulled her into him.

"I had to see my aunt," said Draco. He had told her about how he was hiding Andromeda and the others shortly after her father's death. She had wanted to know who his connection in the resistance was, and he was finding it harder and harder to lie to her.

"Why?" she asked, turning and looking at him with fluttering eyelashes.

"We are following a lead on the resistance to Godric's Hollow tomorrow. I had to warn them."

Hermione blinked. "But … the resistance doesn't know you're the spy, do they?"

Draco sighed. "No."

"Then how will they know not to attack you?"

"They won't."

Hermione froze. Her lip quivering, she said, "Draco, you … you can't go on that mission. It will be a deathtrap."

"It will be fine," he said. "I have done it a dozen times before."

"But -"

"There are no buts, Hermione. I have to go. Would you rather I didn't warn them and let the Death Eaters take them by surprise?"

Hermione sighed. "No. I would rather you weren't a Death Eater."

"Too late to change the past," he said, giving her cheek a stroke. "You remember what to do if I don't return?"

Hermione gulped. "Go to Bronson the moment the curfew is lifted and have him take me to Andromeda."

"And you remember the knock?"

She nodded shallowly before doing the knock on his chest.

"Good," said Draco, taking her hand in his own before bringing it up to his lips and kissing it. If he could not have her lips then this was a close second.

Hermione's eyes began to tear. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"Of course I will," he said with a smirk.

She began to nuzzle into his chest.

Now it was time for the big question. "If I see anyone you know and opportunity

presents itself, should I tell them you're here?"

Hermione thought about this. "I suppose you could tell Harry, Ron, or Neville. But *only* if you can actually get them to sit down and listen. I don't want any of them finding out and then breaking into the city to get to me. Just tell them …" She gulped. "Tell them I'll be with them shortly."

Draco nodded against the top of her head. "I suppose I should warn you now that this opportunity is highly unlikely."

Draco could not see from his current angle, but Hermione was smiling against him. She had already told him that she was not ready to leave and she meant it. Not until she knew where the two of them stood and, after her confession about Lucius, it was even more unclear than it had been before.

It was not long before Hermione's breathing became shallow against his chest. She had had a nightmare the night before about Lucius, but, tonight, her dreams were all about Draco. About what their lives could have been like if they lived in a different world. One where there were no obstacles threatening to tear them apart, other than their own stubborn personalities.

At least, if a world like that was possible to obtain, they would be more appreciative of each other than they ever could have been otherwise. And that thought was not unpleasant at all.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Draco walked through the forest outside of Godric's Hollow, a spell cast on his feet to erase his footprints from the snow. He stopped at the edge of the trees and stared into the small village, everything appearing peaceful as a few townsfolk walked around at a calm, leisurely pace.

"Looks very threatening here, Rabby," said Draco, glancing over his shoulder at his fellow Death Eaters and a few werewolves.

"I didn't say everyone here knew of the resistances presence. They are in hiding," he spat.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Everyone scatter around the village, enter from different pathways and search their homes and shops. Do *not* wreak havoc. That is not why we're here. Understand?"

Everyone grunted and nodded before dispersing along the edges of the forest.

Draco and Theo were the only ones to stay where they were, waiting a few moments before heading into the village, several suspicious eyes suddenly falling upon them.

"I see we're as welcome as ever," said Theo.

"After last year, what do you fucking expect?" asked Draco, pulling up his hood on his Death Eater robes which he normally avoided wearing. But there was no getting out of it today.

Draco and Theo walked on, heading straight through the village square and towards the residential streets. They noticed Rabastan, Rodolphus and Alecto all hanging rather close to where they were going, of course. It was, after all, the most obvious of places for resistance members to be hiding.

Stopping in front of the Potters' home, Draco turned to Theo and said, "Stay out here. I'll call if I need anything."

Theo nodded and took his stance, having fun making footprints and watching them disappear. Draco had to roll his eyes a bit, slightly disturbed that this was the wizard he had chosen as his ally.

Draco stepped inside and was immediately met with the burnt remains of the Potters' former home. He felt a horrible chill as a breeze slipped in through the broken window. Photos still hung on the walls from the family's short time here, and he could not help but laugh at how infant Potter looked *exactly* like the annoying bastard he went to school with, minus the scar.

There was a faint creak on the second floor, making Draco's head jerk upwards. He was not sure if it was the sound of an old house settling or something more but, either way, it was worth investigating.

He would like to think that the resistance would not be hiding in the most obvious of places but, he supposed, that was the beauty of it. Part of him did not even want to bother coming here, but Andromeda had said he should. He also figured that if Potter *was* here then he would not be able to help stopping by his old home. The place where his parents had sacrificed their lives for him. It had to have plenty of sentimental value for him, considering how bloody emotional he was all of the time. Wore his heart on his sleeve, a trait Draco was glad he did not suffer from himself.

He slowly ascended the stairs, his wand at the ready as he tried not to touch anything. Call him sentimental, but it just seemed wrong to taint this place with

Death Eater hands. He reached the top of the stairs, unsure of where to go until he heard another creak coming from behind a door at the end of the hall.

Draco headed towards it, suddenly feeling very nervous at the thought of dying here today, and never seeing Hermione's face again. Never seeing her roll her eyes or scrunch up her face when deep in thought. Or the way her beautiful amber irises lit up whenever she did something she was particularly proud of, like cooking something he really enjoyed instead of just pretending for her benefit. She always knew when he pretended.

Reaching the end of the hall, Draco pushed the door, which was already open a crack. He took a slow step inside, and then another. Looking around, he saw that he had entered what must have once been a nursery, but was now nothing more than the destroyed remains of angry Death Eaters' wrath. The walls were tarnished with foul words that very well might have been written in blood, obviously charmed to never wash off, and the crib was tilted over and in shambles on the floor.

Just then, Draco heard that familiar creak. It was coming from beside him but he knew better. Misleading Spells were not easy, but they were not exactly difficult either, and it seemed like just the sort of thing a member of the resistance would use.

In a swift motion, Draco whipped around and aimed his wand sharply at the door, not incredibly surprised to see Ron doing the same right back at him.

"I had a feeling it was you in here, Weasley." A feeling of dread. "Never too far from something pertaining to your boyfriend."

"And I see you're as hilarious as ever," Ron said scornfully.

"Naturally," said Draco with a smirk.

"Why are you and your Death Eaters here, Malfoy?"

Draco shrugged. "Nothing really. Just following what I had hoped to be a false lead on your little … *group.*"

"You all have no business -"

"Spare me your tirade, Weasley. I did not come here to fight with you."

Ron pursed his eyebrows. "Then why are you -?"

"You and I need to have an important chat. Sans wands." Draco began to lower his and carefully put it into his pocket. "Now, I am entrusting you not to strike an unarmed wizard."

"Pick it back up!" spat Ron.

"Put yours down," said Draco, crossing his arms. "We will not start our chat until your wand is away, and you will, undoubtedly, want to hear what I have to say."

Ron sneered and pointed his wand sharper.

"It's about Hermione."

Ron's eyes widened, his hand slackening slightly as he asked, "What about her?"

"Not until you -"

"Just tell me if she's fucking alive, Malfoy!"

Draco grinded his teeth. Merlin, he hated this. "Of course she is. Now, lower your wand."

Ron stared unsurely at Draco for a moment, the inner debate in his head quite visible in his expression. Despite all of that, he slowly began to lower his hand, eventually slipping his wand into his pocket, but leaving it poking out so that it would be easy to grab.

"Go on," he said in a shaky voice.

Draco cleared his throat. "I am sure you have already guessed this by the unfortunate events that transpired in Australia, but Hermione is no longer in the Dark Lord's possession."

"S-she's escaped?"

Draco grunted. Apparently, he was going to have to spell this out for him. "Yes, Weasley, that is what I'm getting at."

Ron took a deep breath, clenching his fists as he cast his eyes to the floor. "Why are you telling me this? I have a hard time believing you have no ulterior motives."

"Oh, big word!"

Ron's eyes shot back up and he glared at him.

Draco smirked. "Sorry. Old habits, you know? But I have no ulterior motives, Weasley. I am simply telling you to ease your woes."

"That's it?" said Ron, teeth now baring.

"Sure," said Draco with a shrug. "And I might know where she is."

Ron tensed. "Where -?"

"I'm not telling you that, Weasel," said Draco. "If I did then we both know you and Potter are just going to end up doing something hasty and, undoubtedly, stupid. She'll be back with you soon enough."

"I don't believe you," hissed Ron.

"You don't have to. I am simply relaying a message," said Draco. "But, while I have you here, there is something I would like to ask. If I may."

Ron made no movements, which Draco took to mean yes.

"I recently spotted Longbottom in the Black Market. Would you care to share how exactly it is he got into the city undetected?" Draco was not expecting an answer but, hey, he had to give it a shot.

But he was still a bit surprised when Ron's eyebrows creased, suddenly glaring at him with eyes so cold they could turn him into a block of ice. "Is that supposed to be funny or something?"

"Come again?" said Draco, having absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

Within a flash, Ron's wand was out of his pocket and aimed once more at Draco. "And to think I almost bloody believed you were giving me real information!"

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Eh?"

"Fuck you, Malfoy!"

"I am really not sure how this conversation steered wrong. What did I say, now?"

"You *know*!"

"I don't."

"You *know*, Malfoy! You *know* that your Death Eaters took Neville four bloody months ago!"

"What?" said Draco, his face suddenly dropping. "Weasley, if they did, I know absolutely nothing about -"

Suddenly, a floorboard creaked. And then another. And another. Someone who was not clever enough to disguise their footsteps was walking up the stairs.

"What do you think? One of yours or one of mine?" said Draco, taking his wand back out. "Probably mine, since the bloody arses all seem to lack the art of guile. You would think that so many former Slytherins would be better at it. Really I just think they're lazy."

Completely ignoring Draco, Ron moved out of the doorway and stepped more into the room, getting into a position that gave him access to shoot curses at both Draco and whoever it was to walk through that door.

Staying where he was, Draco quickly recognized someone in a Death Eater robe heading down the hallway.

"Mine," he said quietly so only Ron could hear.

"You in here alone, Malfoy?" asked the familiar voice of Alecto Carrow.

Draco grimaced. *Damn*. He had been hoping for someone with less of a vendetta against Ron. Well, this would surely end in a mess.

"Do you see anyone else?" he said.

"I heard voices."

"Don't worry about it, Carrow. Get lost."

"What makes you think you can order me around?" she said, taking a few steps closer.

"I'm sorry, did you not hear the Dark Lord yesterday?" Draco asked mockingly. "I am the lead on this mission. Now … Get. Lost."'

"No," said Alecto, taking a few more steps forward.

Draco aimed his wand at her and she quickly Disapparated, only to appear in the nursery directly behind Ron. He whipped around and the two locked eyes.

"*You*!" spat Alecto. Aiming her wand, she quickly shouted, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

It was slow enough that Ron was able to leap out of the way, but he fell to the ground in the process and had barely steadied himself before she was trying again. It would have hit him too, if Draco had not grabbed him and yanked him out of the way, quickly Apparating the two of them outside.

"What the fuck are you doing?" shouted Ron, pushing Draco off of him once they landed in the snow.

"Saving your fucking arse, apparently."

"Well … *don't*!" Ron stumbled to his feet and looked back at the cottage, accidentally locking eyes with Alecto in the window. "Shit!"

He took off running into the trees, but Alecto Apparated down and was quick to run after him. "You killed my brother, you fucking bastard!"

"Draco!"

Draco turned to see Theo running towards him.

"What's going -?"

"You fucking let Carrow get inside!" Draco said quickly.

Theo froze. "I didn't … I mean, she must have gone in the back or -"

"Doesn't matter. She's gone after Weasley. We need to move."

Draco ran in their direction with Theo just behind him.

Theo could not help but roll his eyes. "Are we seriously trying to save fucking Weasley? If our Hogwarts selves could only see us now."

"Shut it!" Draco shouted back at him.

When they found them, Ron was in the middle of a small clearing, shooting Killing Curses at Alecto while she darted behind trees. She quickly Disapparated out of his line of vision and, while he was searching for her, she reappeared and tackled him to the ground.

"You'll pay for what you did to my brother!" she shouted, trying to aim her wand at him while he grabbed her wrists and wrestled it away.

"Seriously, Carrow?" said Draco, leaning casually against a tree. "Your family's

inbreeding is becoming a real nuisance. You'll find another lover. Maybe a cousin? I can name a few for you." While Draco had meant it as a joke, he was not completely unaware of how many Malfoys had married their second and third cousins. Never first, though. As far as he knew.

"Shut your sick, twisted mouth, Malfoy! And stay out of this! It does not concern you!"

"Actually, it does," he said, picking at his nails.

Theo cocked his head and stared curiously at the sight in front of them. His wand was out and ready, but he did not seem especially eager to use it. It was obvious Alecto was not winning.

"You interrupted a very important conversation between Weasley and me. And do you really think the Dark Lord would appreciate you killing Potter's best mate?"

"I'm not going to kill him!"

"Really? And I suppose those Killing Curses you were just shooting at him a moment ago were simply to make him wet his trousers?"

"I was surprised!" she shouted. "All I plan to do is torture him to the point where he'll be begging me to die! Just like what I did to his precious Mudblood, Granger!"

All three wizards tensed, none more than Draco who suddenly felt all of his blood rush to his head. He began taking deep, heated breaths.

"Do you want me to tell you all about what I did to her, blood traitor? As payback for you taking my brother's life?"

In a quick moment, Ron was swiftly tossing Alecto off of him and jumping back to his feet. She did the same and they aimed their wands at each other, ready to attack.

"How dare you touch her!" he shouted.

Alecto smiled wickedly. "Oh, I am not the one who touched her. I merely tortured her so horribly that she faded in and out of consciousness for days." She chuckled. "You should have seen her tattered body once I was through with her, not even aware of all of the men I brought in to have their bloody way with her while she was in too much pain to even realize what was happening -"

"*Crucio*!"

Ron winced as the curse shot from Draco's wand, positive that it was aimed for him. But then Alecto dropped to her knees, screaming out in agonizing pain as Ron stared at her, dumbfounded.

Clearly, the curse discombobulated her a bit, because she seemed to have no idea that Draco was the one who had cast it. Ron was still in too much shock to move, so she leapt at him, tackling him into the snow once more before aiming her wand at his heart.

"You *will* suffer you fucking little -"

"Take me!" Ron shouted suddenly.

Alecto furrowed her brow. "What?"

"You need one of us, right? I will come with you obediently if you let Hermione go!"

Draco's throat went raw as he noticed the desperate look on Ron's face as he spoke. This was not just about saving his friend. After all of this time, he was still very much in love with her. Draco suddenly found himself overcome with a surprising amount of anger.

"That's fucking stupid, Weasley," said Draco, moving off of his tree and taking several steps towards them. "Surely, even *you* know better than to make a deal with a Death Eater?"

"I'll take the risk!"

Alecto looked up at Draco and smirked.

Draco sighed. "I already told you. We *don't* have her anymore."

Alecto's smirk quickly faded. "Why the fuck would you tell him that, Malfoy?"

"It does not concern you," said Draco, lifting his wand and pointing it at Alecto. "*Crucio*!"

She fell backwards and began writhing and screaming in the snow, ironically making a shape similar to a snow angel as she did so.

While Alecto was down, Ron got back to his feet and aimed his wand at Draco. "What the bloody hell are you doing?" he shouted. "*Why* do you keep helping me?"

"I thought I already made that clear," said Draco, watching Alecto carefully. When

her squirming began to die down, he aimed his wand once more and shouted, "*Crucio*!"

"Is that all really necessary, Malfoy?" asked Theo, taking a few steps into the clearing.

"Of course it is," said Draco, suddenly shouting, "*Crucio*!" three times in a row. He smirked. "I have wanted to do this for a long time."

"*RON*!" An earthshattering scream suddenly echoed through the forest. All three wizards glanced around frantically. Draco recognized that scream. From the radio.

"GINNY!" Ron shouted while still keeping his wand aimed at Draco.

Draco suddenly found himself wishing that Ginny was the Weasley he had run across instead of Ron. From what Hermione had told him, she was definitely the most sensible one in the family. It was safe to say that his conversation with Ron had been nothing but a waste of time.

Ron looked back at Draco and pointed his wand fervently, but Draco did not flinch, still keeping his wand aimed at the struggling Alecto.

"What are you going to do, Weasley? Kill me?" He smirked. "You don't have it in you."

"I've killed before."

"Of course you have. We all have. But I have obviously put enough doubt in your mind that you are not going to take that risk. If I hadn't then I would already be dead."

Ron's nostrils flared. "I don't believe a word you've said to me, Malfoy. You're a manipulative bastard who mentioned the one person you knew would make me cooperate. Even going as far as calling her by her bloody first name."

Draco pursed his lips. Oh, right. Ron was used to him calling her Mudblood or Granger.

"But you saved my life up there." He motioned towards the house before slowly lowering his wand. "So we're even."

And, with that, Ron quickly turned on his foot and took off running, going the long way around back to the village.

Draco sneered. "Go fucking after him, Theo. Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid."

Theo nodded before looking down at Alecto, who had finally stopped struggling but was too beaten to do anything more than lie there and catch her breath. "You going to kill her?" he asked.

"Obviously," answered Draco.

Theo nodded again and said, "Don't be gentle about it," before running after Ron.

When Theo was gone, Draco took a few more steps so he was standing directly above Alecto. He crouched down and placed the tip of his wand on her heart.

"W-why?" she asked in a strained voice.

"So sorry, Carrow." Not really. "But you sealed your fate the day you touched Hermione. I saw your handiwork and you must suffer for it."

"Y-you know where she is?"

Draco smirked. "That's right." He then reached into her pocket and pulled out a small object shaped like the Carrow family crest. "Looks like your bloodline ends with you." He pressed his wand deeper into her skin. "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Alecto's body immediately went stiff, her wide eyes still staring up at him as he slipped the crest into his own pocket. He would have liked to torture her more, but this was hardly the place. Someone could run by and catch him at any moment.

Standing back up, Draco left her body there and returned to the village. When he arrived in the village square, resistance members, including a male and female redhead, were scattering into the forest while several Death Eaters chased after them. There were several '*Pops*' indicating Apparition. The Death Eaters all returned shortly.

Glancing around, Draco saw that one of Greyback's werewolves and Crabbe Sr. were lying dead on the ground. It looked like the Carrow bloodline was not the only one ending today.

"What the *hell* happened?" shouted Rabastan, stomping over to Draco.

"Looks like your source steered us wrong. *Again*."

"No they did not!" he spat, his entire body turning a bright crimson. "There is no

way they could -"

"Why not?" asked Draco. "The resistance would not have been able to take out three of us with absolutely no casualties if they were not already aware that we were coming!"

Rabastan froze. "Three?" he asked.

Draco nodded. "Carrow is dead in the forest just passed the Potter home. Go and retrieve her," he ordered.

Rabastan took several deep, angry breaths before walking off with Goyle just behind him.

When Draco looked back at Crabbe's body, Pansy was leaning over it. She kneeled down and sighed before carefully closing his eyes. Draco walked over and knelt down beside her, searching his pockets until he came out with a small version of the Crabbe family crest.

"What's that?" asked Pansy.

"None of your concern, Parkinson," said Draco, slipping it beside the other one in his pocket. "But, if you happen to see your father with one of these, I suggest you grab it and give it to me."

Pansy nodded before standing up and going over to close the eyes of the werewolf.

Feeling a bit off, Draco walked away and leaned against the stone hedge barricading the graveyard. Hearing some rustling behind him, he turned just in time to see the smiling ghost of a woman disappear into a tree. Something immediately began to glitter where she had been.

Mildly curious, Draco stepped into the graveyard, feeling nervous as he passed the tombstones of James and Lily Potter while heading for the tree. He stopped where the ghost had been, noticing the glittering item buried halfway in the snow. He leaned down and picked it up, suddenly coming face-to-face with a ring. The band was silver with a round amber stone surrounded by a circle of diamonds that almost made it appear eye-like. It immediately made him think of Hermione.

Suddenly, someone was grabbing the ring out of Draco's hand. He turned to see Rodolphus standing there, gazing at it mesmerizingly.

He lifted his wand to his throat and said, "It is the same color as her eyes."

With a painful grimace, he used all of his might to toss the ring across the graveyard. Draco touched his wand in his pocket and silently cast a spell to freeze it midflight.

"Did you get the crests?" Rodolphus asked, suddenly looking very weary.

"Yes," answered Draco. "Eight more?"

"Nine now," said Rodolphus. "Greyback wanted in. Don't ask why because, I'm afraid, I have no answer other than him being pathetic."

Rodolphus turned and left in a hurry, obviously wanting to get back to the others before Rabastan could ever know he was gone.

As soon as Draco was alone again, he used his wand to guide the ring back into his hand. He did not know why he wanted it but, with Christmas coming up, it would not be such a horrible present for Hermione.

There was an echoing giggle that sounded a bit like bells coming from Draco's right side. He turned and saw the smiling ghost floating through the graveyard. "Thanks," he said before slipping it into the opposite pocket than the crests were in. He did not want that cruel magic tainting it.

The ring now in his possession, Draco headed back towards the others in hopes of getting out of here quickly. He would, undoubtedly, be punished for his failure today, and he wanted to get it over with before Hermione had the chance to worry too much.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Hermione sat alone in their room, just below the window with the radio playing beside her. It was George and Angelina talking right now, but she knew it was only a matter of time before someone reported what had happened in Godric's Hollow. Even if there were no casualties, they would surely mention it.

The sky outside grew dark and Hermione was becoming more and more nervous. She chewed on her thumb while listening closely for any sign of the alarm on the fireplace. The flat was silent other than the radio.

Hermione suddenly found herself whimpering. She hated this. She hated everything -

"Ginny, what are you doing here?" George said suddenly.

Hermione leaned in.

"We were attacked by Death Eaters in Godric's Hollow," Ginny blurted out quickly. "Any resistance members headed there, please turn around immediately and go elsewhere. It is not safe there now."

"Any casualties?" Angelina asked nervously.

Hermione's palms began to sweat, her heart aching at the horrible thought of losing Draco.

"None on our side. But a Death Eater and a werewolf are dead."

"Two," said another voice, suddenly appearing.

"What?" said Ginny.

"Two Death Eaters are dead," answered the strained voice of Ron.

Hermione's throat went raw as tears began to flood her eyes.

"Are you sure?" asked Ginny.

"Positive," said Ron. Then there was shuffling.

"Ron, wait! What happened at the Potters' -" Ginny's voice trailed off.

Hermione sat there motionless as the radio suddenly became static. The Potters' house. Somehow, she just knew that this was where Draco had gone. To find Harry or Ron. For her.

She lifted her hand to her mouth as she began to sob. No. It couldn't -

Suddenly, the clock in the living room chimed, signaling the top of the hour. She looked at the smaller clock on the nightstand. Midnight.

"No!" Hermione shouted, shaking her head in disbelief. "No! No! Please, Merlin, NO!"

Hermione listened, but the alarm on the fireplace never went off. First it was a minute after midnight, then thirty, and then two hours.

"No …"

She brought her knees up to her chest and sobbed uncontrollably into them.

"Please, Merlin, tell me he didn't. Tell me Ron didn't -"

Hermione choked. She could not even say it. If Ron had killed Draco, how could she ever forgive him?

"Draco, please … please come back to me."

Time continued to pass and, still, Hermione sat there. She knew she was supposed to be preparing to leave, but she refused. Draco was coming back. She was sure of it. And, when he did, she would be here waiting for him. Because that's what you do when you love someone. You wait.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Draco lay on the sofa by the fireplace in the Dark Lord's manor, his body in a great deal of pain as he waited impatiently for the clock to strike four a.m. So that he could get home and stop Hermione from leaving.

He had not been expecting Voldemort to torture him for as long as he did and, after the hours of torture Rabastan had to endure, it was already well after midnight by the time it all ended.

Pansy suddenly walked into the room, carrying a goblet full of a potion she had just finished brewing for him. Draco tried to sit up but she pushed him back down.

"You should save your strength," she said, carefully tilting his head back and feeding it to him.

Lucius was watching from a nearby armchair, his eyes sad and heavy as he never took them off of his hurting son. Theo was there too, also watching the clock with great anticipation. He had tried to leave to warn Hermione of Draco's late arrival, but the Dark Lord had wanted to question everyone. Unfortunately, they had to pin Alecto's death on Ron. He had always been a target, but now there was an even bigger price on his head. Draco hated himself for losing control like that, but Alecto needed to die. She deserved to after everything she had done to Hermione. Surely Ron would understand.

"The Dark Lord should not have treated you this way," Lucius said suddenly, his fists clenching on his knees. "This was not your failure. That bloody Rabastan -"

"He got it worse than I did," interrupted Draco. "Besides, this was my mission, Father. I was in charge. We all know the punishment for failing."

"But -"

"This is nothing I can't handle. If you remember, the Dark Lord did much worse to me after the war."

Lucius cringed at the memory. "Your mother would be so ashamed if she knew I let this happen."

"Probably," said Draco. "But it is too late to change any of that now. I am a Death Eater, and I made the decision to become one on my own."

Suddenly, the clock struck four a.m. Draco stood up, his limbs still stiff and in pain, but much better with the potion in him.

"I'm going home," he said. Draco looked at his father. "Tell the Dark Lord I won't be in today. I need my rest."

Draco headed to the fireplace and grabbed a handful of Floo powder. He tossed it in, stepped into the green flames and was quickly sucked away to his flat.

When he got there, everything was completely still. Looking at the coffee table, Draco saw that *Hogwarts: A History* was still on it. He was not sure whether to be relieved or angry.

Cloak and shoes still on, Draco ran to his bedroom and threw open the door. "Hermione!"

Her small figure was hunched below the window, her knees to her chest with her face buried inside of them. She slowly lifted her head, her swollen eyes widening as they fell upon him.

Hermione burst into tears as she struggled to get to her feet. She ran to him and immediately threw her arms around his waist, squeezing him tightly as she began to weep into his chest.

Draco's eyes also began to tear as he brought his arms around her shoulders. "Thank Merlin you're still here."

"I knew you'd come back," she cried. "I knew you'd never leave me."

Hermione pulled back so she could look into his eyes. The two of them gazed at each other, Draco using his thumb to stroke her cheek as he realized how happy he was to be here with her. Without a second thought, Draco leaned down and kissed her, her lips tasting as divinely sweet as ever.

It was not long until that need they both constantly felt when together took over.

Before Draco knew what was happening, the two of them were naked and he was shagging her hard on the bed.

The familiar sounds of Hermione's moans gave Draco the comfort that he had not realized he was missing. He hated himself for doing this after what he had found out about his father, but he was already too invested in her to just give her up. He loved her, and he needed her, despite what he tried to tell himself.

It did not take either of them long to finish but, for a while after, Draco stayed inside of her, relishing on the familiar feeling as he continued to kiss her, still unable to get enough of those lips.

It was well into the day before Draco finally told Hermione everything that had happened, the two of them interlacing their hands on his chest while she used them to stroke the bruises left over from the torture he had endured.

"I am sorry I failed you."

Hermione shook her head. "No, you didn't, Draco. You tried to talk to Ron. We both knew it was a longshot. I'm … I'm more upset about Alecto."

Draco looked down at her and cocked an eyebrow.

Hermione sighed. "You shouldn't take those risks for me," she said, reaching up and stroking his cheek. "I care more about your safety than I do about vengeance. Please don't let what has happened to me run your life. It's not worth it."

Putting his hand on top of hers, Draco stared deeply into her eyes and said, "But you are worth it, Hermione."

He leaned down and kissed her then, hearing no more objections as the two of them got lost in each other for the remainder of the day.

# Chapter 18: Here, There and Everywhere

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"So I have compiled a list of all potential Death Eaters who may be in possession of a crest," said Hermione, laying a piece of parchment out on the coffee table for all to see. "These up at the top in black ink are the ones we have. Rodolphus Lestrange, Alecto Carrow and Orson Crabbe. The ones just below that in red are the people we know for certain have one. Rabastan Lestrange, Gordon Goyle, Quincy Nott," she glanced sideways at Theo, "and Fenrir Greyback. There are twelve overall and we still have five that are unaccounted for. That is where the names in purple come in."

"Why purple?" asked Quigley.

"It was the only other color ink Draco had," Hermione said with a frown. "I had wanted green ink for the ones we already have so it would look more positive, or yellow for our possible options since it expresses a sense of hope, but that would not have shown up very well on the white parchment, so I suppose purple works as well as anything. It is said to express mystery and that is certainly what we have here."

When Hermione looked up, everyone was staring blankly at her. She blushed and quickly looked back at her parchment.

"So … why do you have purple ink, mate?" asked Quigley, glancing over at Draco from the armchair he was seated in.

"I have no fucking idea," answered Draco.

"I found it buried in the back," said Hermione. "But that is hardly what's important here. We *need* to make sure we have all possible names." She used her wand to make them larger for all to see.

*Bellatrix Lestrange*

*Stuart Parkinson*

*Walden Macnair*

*Yaxley (First name unknown)*

*Antonin Dolohov*

*Thorfinn Rowle*

*Arron Greengrass*

*Lucius Malfoy*

"My father?" asked Draco, pursing his eyebrows.

"We are covering all of our bases, Draco," said Hermione. "Now, did I forget anyone?"

Draco and Theo looked at each other curiously. "Maybe Flint's father, Mathis," said Theo. "He does not hang around the others much, since his family is so obviously inferior, but he tries often enough that I don't believe we should rule him out as a possibility."

"Mathis Flint," repeated Hermione while dipping her quill in the purple ink. "Good one. Any others?"

"No," said Theo, looking once more at Draco, who shrugged. "I believe you've compiled a perfectly good list. Though, Lucius and Arron are stretching it a bit. Why would he want your position taken from you if he is trying to marry you off to his daughter?"

"Well, if they offed Lucius, and then put enough doubt in You-Know-Who's mind to execute Draco, his family would come into a great deal of money, wouldn't they?" said Hermione, setting down her quill. "It would certainly explain why he is so suddenly trying to push this along."

When she looked up, everyone was staring at her blankly again.

"Stop doing that!"

"Here we all are," said Bronson, walking over from the kitchen and putting a plate

piled with freshly baked pieces of focaccia on the coffee table beside her parchment. "A little brain food for everyone while the dinner is cooking. I remembered you were a fan, Theo." He winked at him before taking a seat on the only available armchair.

"So what exactly is the plan here?" asked Theo, trying a little too hard to ignore Bronson's wink. "That Roddy fucker said they only ever don't have the crests on them when they're with the Dark Lord, and we need to take them all at the same time so they don't notice and warn the others."

"Yes, I have already thought of that," said Draco, staring down at all of the names Hermione had written on the parchment. "The only time we'll ever really have is during our meetings."

"But those only ever last an hour, if that."

"Has Astoria had her coronation yet?" asked Hermione, looking at Draco.

"It's tomorrow," he answered.

"That will last longer, won't it? And it's mandatory."

"Yes, but, because it's mandatory, Theo and I won't be able to get out of it to search everywhere. Meetings are easier."

"Well … why can't I do it?"

Draco froze, his jaw tightly clenched as he glanced sideways at her with a cold stare. "Excuse me?"

"Why not?" she said, furrowing her brow.

"Uhh … Because it's fucking dangerous," he spat.

"So? You do dangerous things every day."

"Comes with the territory."

"And being a runaway slave? *That's* not dangerous territory?" she asked. "Look, I can wear my invisibility cloak and use my stone to Floo in. No one will be any the wiser."

Draco narrowed his eyes at her and very sternly said, "No. Bronson or Quigley can -"

"They don't know those houses like I do, Draco!" shouted Hermione, rising to her feet. "I've been there! I know half of those people's bedrooms like the back of my bloody hand!"

Draco's already alabaster skin turned even paler as he continued to gaze at her. Looking around, Hermione noticed the other three making a clear point *not* to look at her. She sighed.

"Sorry to be blunt, but that is the reality." Hermione stormed off towards their bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

"Well … this seems like our definite cue for alcohol," said Bronson, getting back to his feet. "Would you say this is a wine night?"

Quigley was the only one who nodded.

Bronson did not even make it to the kitchen before Draco was shooting up from the sofa and following Hermione into the bedroom, making sure to slam the door twice as hard as she did.

"Oh, those two. Always fighting for control," said Bronson as he pulled some glasses out of one of the cabinets.

"You and your bloody dramatics again," said Draco as soon as the door was closed.

Hermione raised her wand and put up a Silencing Charm. "You're one to talk," she said, taking a seat on the bed. "Draco, part of the reason I liked being around you in the beginning was because you didn't treat me like I was this fragile porcelain doll. What happened to that?"

Well, he cared a lot more now than he did in the beginning. "It's not that I think you're incapable of doing this without getting caught," he said. "It's just that I don't want you to."

Hermione scoffed. "*You* don't want me to?"

"That's right."

"Well, if that's the only reason then why in Merlin's name should I listen?"

"You should listen because I know what's fucking best, Hermione. You're *not* doing this," he said sternly.

"Yes I am, Draco. With or without your consent."

"Fuck no you're not!" he shouted.

"Fuck yes I am!" she shouted back, rising to her feet. "Someone needs to do this and I'm the best option! You *know* I am!"

"We'll find another fucking way!"

"NO, DRACO," said Hermione, deepening her voice. "I need to do this and you can't stop me!"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you *need* to do this?"

Hermione blushed and cast her eyes to the floor. "Because."

"Because why?"

Her voice suddenly becoming very quiet, Hermione shyly looked back up at Draco and said, "Because you helped me when I was in trouble, so if there's an opportunity to return the favor then I'm going to take it. Please, just let me do this for you."

Draco gazed back at her and sighed. His fists clenching, he said through gritted teeth, "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I know," she said, taking a few steps forward and grabbing one of his tense hands. "But nearly every day I have to watch you walk out of here, knowing that there is a possibility you won't be coming back. This is a war, Draco. We all need to risk our lives from time to time. And … and I want to expose those bastards for what they are! Twisted, manipulative pricks who need to be put in their place! And who better to do that than you?" Hermione smiled proudly.

Draco smiled back. "Don't tell me you get off on me being head Death Eater?"

Hermione shrugged nonchalantly. "What can I say? I like a man who is clever enough to have fooled the most evil wizard to ever exist into believing he is loyal. For over four years."

"Does it get you hot?" asked Draco, grinning smugly as he pulled her tightly

against him.

Hermione blushed as he began to harden against her. "Draco, there are people in the other room."

"So?" he said, kissing her neck. "You put up a Silencing Charm. Besides, they think we're fighting. I'm sure they already expect to be waiting a while."

"Our fight hasn't ended, you know?"

"Sure it has. You're going to do whatever the fuck you want whether I like it or not, I'm going to get bloody pissed, and then we'll shag and make up. In fact, why don't we skip a few steps and start that last one right now?" His hands slipped down her sides and he began to undo her trousers.

Hermione grabbed his wrists and held them still.

"Come on, Hermione," he said, licking her ear before moving to her jaw. "Just a quick shag. No one will be any the wiser."

Hermione's hands eased and Draco was able to slip his fingers into her knickers.

He smirked. "I knew you were into this."

Within seconds, both of their trousers were off and Hermione was pushing Draco onto the bed, quickly pouncing on top of him.

Out in the front room, Bronson was back in his armchair, sipping his wine slowly while they all waited patiently. "Five galleons says they're shagging in there."

There were several seconds of silence.

"Make it ten and you're on," said Theo.

Bronson smirked. Easy money.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Draco sat on the sofa with his head held low as Hermione fiddled around. She had her small bag strapped to her waist with everything in it as a precaution, and wore all black since the invisibility cloak she had purchased was not the best. They had both worked on strengthening the Disillusionment Charm on it but were unsure of how long it would last.

"Draco … it's time for you to be going," she said, stopping in front of him.

Draco slowly stood, staring at the floor silently for a moment before holding out his arms and waiting for her to come into them. Hermione did just that, wrapping hers around his waist and nuzzling into his chest.

"It will be fine, Draco. Anyone who poses any danger will be where you are."

"Don't you dare go in thinking like that, Hermione. House-elves are viciously loyal. If one of them sees you -"

"They *won't* see me. I have a spell that will detect the location of any living beings, and I am sure that some of the Death Eaters are stupid enough not to cast Protection Spells on their crests. Should we place bets on how many I can get simply by saying '*Accio crest*' upon entering? I know Bronson just *loves* placing bets," Hermione said bitterly.

Draco smirked. That was true. They had found out yesterday when they came out of the bedroom and, apparently, Hermione's disheveled hair had said it all, even though she had attempted to fix it beforehand. There was just no hiding sex hair in that bushy mess.

"I call two."

Hermione smiled. "You're giving your Death Eaters too much credit. I say four."

"All right," said Draco. "And just what are the terms of this bet?"

She scrunched up her face in thought. "Let's just say that whoever wins is free to call the shots tonight."

Draco smirked. "I can live with that."

He leaned in and kissed her. While they were lost in each other's lips, the clock struck six. Time for Astoria's coronation.

Draco reluctantly pulled away, bringing his hand up to stroke her soft cheek while gazing into those lovely amber eyes. "Wait ten minutes before going. And be careful."

Hermione nodded and attempted to smile.

Draco sighed before giving her one final kiss and letting her go. He did not look at her again until he stepped into the fireplace, trying hard not to notice her terrified

eyes as he was sucked away from her.

Hermione waited eight minutes before her impatience got the best of her. She slipped on the invisibility cloak, took several deep breaths and pulled up the hood. After taking a quick glance in a decorative mirror hanging on the wall to make sure the cloak was working properly, Hermione headed over to the fireplace and grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the pot. She had a pouch of it for when she was in the Death Eaters' houses but did not want to waste it here.

With one final deep breath, Hermione stepped into the green flames and said, "Home of Rabastan Lestrange."

Might as well start right off with the bloody prick.

As soon as Hermione entered the house, she cast a nonverbal spell to look for living beings. It appeared that the house-elf was in the kitchen.

"*Accio Lestrange Crest.*" She might as well be specific about it.

Hermione waited a moment, but nothing came to her. She figured it wouldn't. Rabastan was the leader of all of this and, as much as it pained her to admit it, he was not a moron.

No bother. While Rabastan had never owned her, she had been brought here often enough by Rodolphus to know where he might hide things. There was one room in particular that she was never allowed to enter with them. She headed there now, a spell already cast on her feet to silence her footsteps.

When Hermione got to the closed door, she was not surprised to find it locked with many wards. It took her a minute, but she was able to successfully remove all of them, entering the room and quietly shutting the door behind her.

Looking around, Hermione quickly noticed that it was an office. No surprise there. Lifting her wand, Hermione cast a spell that Draco had taught her. It was able to detect where magic had been used most recently, and a particular book on Rabastan's shelf practically glowed with signs of fresh magic. Jackpot.

There were several more wards, but Hermione removed each and every one of them before opening the book, finding the crest and slipping it into a pouch in her pocket, just beside the others Draco had acquired. One down, eight to go.

Her spell sensing that the house-elf was still in the kitchen, Hermione returned to the drawing room and went to the Goyles' home next. She was there for less than a minute. After casting her spell to find that Mrs. Goyle was in the backroom, and

not alone might she add, she tried, "*Accio Goyle Crest*," and, sure enough, it came flying out of an armoire just beside the fireplace. He must have stuffed it in there on his way to the coronation. Idiot.

And on to the next!

Hermione tossed some of her Floo powder into the fireplace, stepped inside and said, "Nott Residence."

She already knew that Quincy Nott would not be as thick as Gordon Goyle. He would have it cleverly hidden, like Rabastan.

Unfortunately for him, he was not anticipating Hermione to be the one coming to look for it, and she knew all of his hidden secrets.

Upon arriving, Hermione walked straight back to Quincy's bedroom, not even bothering to look for living beings since the house-elf went to the market everyday between the hours of six and seven. Why so late, she had never understood, but she was hardly in a position to question the poor creature.

Hermione entered Quincy's bedroom, dropped down beside the bed and tapped her wand three times on the floor, shooting out sparks that caused the floorboards just behind the bed skirt to rise, revealing a small box hidden beneath them. She grabbed it, removed the wards and grabbed the crest, doing her best to ignore the other sketchy items inside of it. Quincy had a strange fetish, and collected certain … samples from his slaves. Hermione saw the phial with her name labeled on it now. She was tempted to take it, but knew that would look too suspicious. She sighed before closing the box and putting everything back in its place.

On her way out, Hermione passed the basement, stopping for a moment to listen to someone crying down there. While she desperately wanted to help them, she knew she could not. As horrible as it was, in the city's current state, the girl was much safer here than she was out there.

Clenching her fists, Hermione gulped to fight back tears and somehow managed to walk away. But it was not easy, and she would, undoubtedly, never forget that moment for the rest of her life.

Fenrir Greyback was next on her list, and the last person they knew for sure had a crest. Even though he was not a formal Death Eater, with the full moon just around the corner, she knew he would not be here.

His home was absolutely disgusting. Hermione had never been here before and

really hoped she would never have to come again.

Not only did he never clean, actually living in his own filth, but the place wreaked of something putrid, quite possibly decaying flesh or blood. Flies swarmed around chunks of raw meat, and Hermione had to breathe through her mouth to be able to stomach the place.

At least it was small. Even smaller than Draco's flat. Hermione said, "*Accio Greyback Crest.*" It, of course, worked, because Fenrir was and idiot. Plain and simple.

Unfortunately, the crest seemed to be trapped in a drawer, because it kept rattling around in there. Hermione groaned before stepping over piles of garbage, dirty clothes and rotten meat. She arrived at the drawer and used her wand to clean off the handle before touching it. When it opened, everything inside of it spilled out, except for the crest which flew into her hand. She let out another groan before pocketing it, kneeling down and carefully shuffling everything back into the drawer.

While on the ground, Hermione noticed something underneath the sofa that caught her eye. It was a shoebox with an object poking out of it. Something thin and wooden. She reached out and grabbed the box, pulling it out from under the sofa.

Hermione gasped.

The box was full of wands. Stolen wands that Fenrir and his sick pack of Snatchers had collected over the years. She began searching through the box frantically. No. Not here. Looking back under the sofa, Hermione found several more boxes. She searched them all, but it was not here. *Her* wand was not here.

Hermione searched every corner of that flat, finding hundreds of wands, but never the right one. Disappointed, Hermione returned everything to its proper place, making sure to pocket a few of the dustier wands, thinking that maybe Draco and Theo could use them. There was no way Fenrir could have any sort of idea how many wands he had or if any would be missing.

Having wasted enough time here, Hermione hurried off to the Parkinsons' home. She knew exactly where to go here, as well, and was not surprised to find a crest there and waiting for her. Next, she tried Macnair's. A crest came to her instantly. That was three. Draco had already lost the bet. She smiled satisfactorily before heading to Yaxley's. His crest also came instantly. Maybe she would not try the spell in the last few places so she would not be lying when she told Draco she was the victor.

As tempting as that sounded, she knew she was running short on time, and there were still two crests and six Death Eaters left.

Hermione tried Antonin Dolohov's home next. Nothing.

Thorfinn Rowle. Nothing.

Mathis Flint. Nothing.

Hermione was starting to get nervous. There was only one other house since Lucius and Arron Greengrass were both staying with Voldemort, and that was the home of Bellatrix Lestrange. The one she shared with her husband, Rodolphus.

Hermione gulped before stepping into Flint's small fireplace and Flooing to the place she had tried to kill a man in.

The moment Hermione arrived, she was forced to stare at the spot where she had stabbed Rodolphus in cold blood, a memory that would forever haunt her.

Shaking off her fears, Hermione cast her detection spell to find that the house-elf was in the master bedroom. That worked out perfectly, because Bellatrix would have been more inclined to hide her crest in her quarters on the other side off the manor. Hermione had often wondered if Bellatrix and Rodolphus had ever shared a bed. She highly doubted it.

Hermione searched the house thoroughly. She hated being here, but refused to leave until she had searched every corner. Still, she came out empty handed. Bellatrix did not have a crest, and Hermione was not surprised at all. But she had also dreaded it, because there were still two crests left, and only two names on her list. Lucius had set up his son.

Hermione grimaced at the thought. First Quincy and now Lucius. Death Eaters were truly sick.

Returning to the fireplace, Hermione took a moment to stare at the spot she had last stood in as a slave. Nothing here had changed, but her life … that was very different. She had someone who cared for her now. Truly cared for her. Not whatever sick, twisted feelings Rodolphus felt for her. She would do anything for Draco. Including protect him from his father. Lucius would not win this. She would not let him.

With a new sense of confidence, Hermione turned to the fireplace, threw a handful of Floo powder into the flames and said, "Minister of Magic's Residence."

Hermione was quickly sucked away and arrived in Voldemort's makeshift home. She could immediately hear voices coming from the other room.

Unable to stop herself, Hermione followed the voices and poked only her head around the corner. Even in her invisibility cloak, she still felt the need to be cautious.

All of the Death Eaters stood in a circle in a tall room, Astoria Greengrass in the center of them with Lord Voldemort. Her left arm was shaking as she held it out to him, looking nervously at a Death Eater who Hermione immediately recognized as Draco. Even with their hoods on, there was no mistaking his stance.

He nodded at her and she looked back at her new lord, staring into his eyes as he grabbed her arm and raised his wand, smiling wickedly as he said, "Welcome to the side of power, young Greengrass."

As he imprinted his mark on her arm, Astoria bit her lip, trying hard not to cry out in pain. Draco had once told Hermione that receiving the Dark Mark hurt terribly, but the more you cried, the worse the Dark Lord made it for you. Either he or her father must have given Astoria this same information.

Forcing herself to look away, Hermione hurried off to the other side of the manor, following the directions Draco had given her to find Arron Greengrass's bedroom.

There were too many living beings in the vicinity for Hermione's spell to work properly, so she had to be extra careful on her way through here. A house-elf did pass her at one point, but she pressed herself firmly against the wall and waited for him to turn the corner before walking on.

When she got to Arron's bedroom door, she looked around carefully before opening it and slipping inside

"*Accio Greengrass Crest.*"

A small chest flew out of the wardrobe and into her hands. Hermione frowned. Five. It looked like she and Draco both gave the Death Eaters too much credit.

After casting an Unlocking Charm on it, Hermione was not surprised to find another crest inside. She wished she had been wrong about Arron's true intentions of trying to marry his daughter off to Draco. Maybe he truly did not want her to be a Death Eater, but the evidence did not look good.

With a sigh, Hermione pocketed the crest and put the chest back in the wardrobe. One more.

Hermione walked towards Lucius's room with a heavy heart. She already hated him, but she knew Draco was torn over his feelings for his father. He wanted to hate him. Because of her. But Lucius was still his father, his flesh and blood, and while he may have hated Muggle-borns, Hermione had never doubted that he loved his son. Until now.

When she arrived at his room, she sighed deeply before opening the door.

"*Accio Malfoy Crest.*"

Nothing happened.

Hermione began searching the room. She knew she did not have long until the coronation was over, and Draco needed those crests before the meeting began.

Hermione tore that room apart. She searched in drawers, in the wardrobe, under the bed, in his luggage, using her wand to handle his disgusting silk knickers. She lifted floorboards, took frames off of walls, picked up every book and figurine to see if there was a hidden passage anywhere. Nothing. The room was clear.

"Shit."

Had she missed something somewhere? No. Hermione had searched those houses thoroughly. Draco and Theo must have been wrong. There must have been someone else who could have -

The door clicked and then burst open. Hermione froze as Lucius came charging into the room. She was just lucky that she had put things back as she went, and even more lucky that she happened to be standing against the wall at that moment.

Lucius went straight for the dresser and began searching through it frantically, eventually coming out with a simple necklace with a flower pendant. He sighed in relief before slipping it into his pocket.

Then Lucius was walking over to the nightstand, the breeze from his hasty movements nearly whipping Hermione's hood off. She grasped it and pulled it down tight.

Lucius was so close Hermione could smell him. It was still the same. A very crisp, woody smell, like cedar and leather, with a small hint of lavender. He ruined lavender.

Pulling a bottle of brandy and a glass out of the nightstand, Lucius poured himself some and drank it all down. He sighed deeply before pouring some more and drinking it even faster than the first glass. Well, it was easy to see where Draco got his drinking problem from.

There was a knock on the door and Lucius's head turned. He put his brandy and glass away before walking towards it, pausing for a moment as he passed Hermione, obviously feeling that something was amiss. He stared at the spot where she was for a long moment. Hermione was sure he could hear her heart beating, because it was only moments away from thumping right out of her chest.

Then there was another knock, making Lucius turn away from her. He went to the door and opened it.

"Arron. What are you doing here?"

"I was hoping we would have a moment to talk before the meeting. About my daughter and your son's future together."

"At this point in time, I would say they have no future together," said Lucius, refusing to step out of the way even though Arron so obviously wanted to enter the room. "Draco has made it very clear that he is not interested."

"But, surely, if you tell him he has no choice -"

"I stopped micromanaging my son's life years ago, Arron. I suggest you do the same with Astoria."

"I don't understand," said Arron. "You were for this only a few short weeks ago. What has changed?"

"Nothing has changed," answered Lucius. "I would not mind it at all if Draco decided to get married, but he is still young. I see no reason to push this now."

"But -"

"If you have any further issues with this, Arron, I suggest you take them up with Draco. This is his decision, and I will not push him into something he seems so dead-set against."

And, with that, Lucius pushed past Arron and pulled the door closed behind him.

Hermione let out a breath of relief before walking over to it and listening to their footsteps. Once she could no longer hear them, she opened the door and slipped

out. Now it was time to meet Draco.

There was a washroom just around the corner that connected to the bedroom beside it. Hermione was to enter through the bedroom and wait for some sign that Draco was the one in the washroom.

When she got there, the door to the washroom was already open a crack, she peeked inside and saw Draco sitting nervously on the side of the bathtub. He kept glancing up and staring at the door. She pushed it open and pulled down her hood.

Draco was on his feet and across the washroom in a flash, pulling her into his arms and kissing her almost desperately.

"Thank Merlin," he said into her mouth before kissing her again.

"Sorry," said Hermione. "I ran into a bit of an issue."

"What's that?" asked Draco, stepping back just enough to look at her, but still keeping his firm grip around her waist.

Hermione reached into her pocket and pulled out the pouch of crests. "I only found eight. There is still one out there."

Draco pursed his eyebrows. "And you were able to check every house?"

"Yes."

"Thoroughly?"

"Yes, Draco," she said, sounding almost annoyed. "It wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere. There has to be someone we missed."

Draco took a deep breath before pressing his forehead against hers. "No matter. Just the one won't do the person any good. Not since we have all the others." He kissed her again. "Who had the other four?"

"Parkinson, Macnair, Yaxley and Greengrass," she said.

"Not my father?" he asked, the relief quite evident in his voice.

"No," said Hermione, thinking it best not to tell him how Lucius had almost caught her just now. It would only make him worry over nothing. "You need to get back out there." She slipped the pouch into his pocket and kissed him softly. "Expose those

bastards as the lying pricks they are. And don't forget to emphasize to You-Know-Who that, since the Protean Charm was not on their wands, they must have used illegal methods to cast the spell. That ought to deserve a painful punishment."

Draco smirked. "You really should have been a Slytherin."

They kissed once more before Draco took her hand and led her towards the door. She slipped her hood back on and he opened the door, holding it for her before following her out and shutting it behind him.

They held hands behind his back while they walked, so no one could see that he was missing one, reluctantly separating when they reached the drawing room. Draco walked into the conference room without hesitation while Hermione headed to the fireplace. She threw in the last of her Floo powder and headed home. The moment she stepped into the familiar living room, she was finally able to breathe again. How in the name of Merlin did Draco do this every day?

Back at the Death Eaters' meeting, Draco's mind kept drifting as he tried to think of who else could have a crest. Looking around the table, it was safe to say that it was not anyone here. There had to be someone else, maybe not even a Death Eater. Just someone close to Rabastan. Maybe it was his anonymous source for resistance information. Draco had to admit that he was more than a little curious as to who it was.

The crests were burning a hole in his pocket as he waited for his opportunity to bring them up.

"We have covered everything that is on the agenda tonight, my lord," said Bellatrix looking up from her parchment and gazing dotingly at Voldemort.

"Is there anything else that needs discussion before we part?" he asked, glancing all around the table.

And here it was.

Draco stood and said, "Yes, my lord. There is something I have been meaning to bring to your attention for quite some time now."

Theo smirked at him from across the table. Draco smirked back before taking the pouch out of his pocket and dumping the crests out directly in front of Voldemort. He heard several gasps and turned to see every Death Eater involved looking as white as a ghost. None more than Rabastan.

"What are these?" asked Voldemort, picking up the Lestrange crest first.

"Those are what Rabastan has been using to blackmail me into doing his bidding. Each crest is connected by a Protean Charm, and, when his is touched by his wand, the other crests let their holders know it is time to strike. He threatened to have everyone of any importance to me killed. The first on his hit list was my father."

Lucius went stiff as he moved his cold eyes to Rabastan.

"The second was Theo, whose own father offered to do the job."

Draco could not help but chuckle as Quincy scooted his chair away from his son.

"The same with Goyle. And so on and so forth."

Voldemort began shuffling through the crests. "So eleven of you -"

"Twelve, actually," corrected Draco. "I was unable to find the last one. It does not belong to anyone in this room, I assure you. And I do not believe there are any other werewolves involved. Who else do you have working for you, Rabby?" he asked, gazing down the table at him.

Rabastan's nostrils flared as he slowly shook his head. "None of your fucking business you prick."

"Language, Rabastan," said Voldemort in an even tone.

"I also feel the need to point out that no traces of a Protean Charm were ever found on Rabastan's wand, so he must have used illegal methods to cast his little spell." Hermione really did have the best wording.

"Yes, that fact has not escaped me," said Voldemort, picking up the Greengrass crest and staring down the table at Arron.

Astoria's eyes widened. "Father … why is *our* family's crest in that pile?"

"For obvious reasons, my lord," said Draco, "I am afraid that any marriage between me and Astoria is not going to work out."

Astoria frowned and nodded. "Understandable."

"Such a pity," said Voldemort, putting the crest back down. "So let me try and understand. I have always considered our small yet elite society to have the makings of a family. It pains me to know that so many of you would be so willing to kill your own brothers, your own children, and all for the sole purpose of usurping

Draco. Possibly even getting him executed?"

No one objected.

"My lord, I would like to request a seat change," said Theo, raising his hand. "I have little interest in remaining next to my potential murderer."

Quincy went red. "It was all a bluff, Theo -"

"Of course," interrupted Voldemort. "From now on, you may take the seat beside Draco."

Same spot, different side. He would just have to switch with Dolohov.

"Rabastan, I would like you to stay behind, but everyone else is dismissed. Draco, perhaps you might come in early tomorrow and we can discuss the proper punishment for these … crest holders."

Draco grinned. "Absolutely, my lord."

Astoria was the first one out of her chair and darting for the door. Her father was quick to run after her. Lucius, on the other hand, stood up very slowly, avoiding everyone's eyes until the room was practically empty. When Draco left, he followed him out.

"Draco, why did you not tell me about the seriousness of their threats?" he asked as his son headed for the fireplace.

"Because it was not your burden to carry, Father. I told you it was nothing I could not handle. And I took care of it, just like I said I would."

Draco stopped in front of the fireplace with Lucius by his side. Theo walked up just behind them.

"But you had no problem burdening young Mr. Nott with your problems?" asked Lucius, cocking an eyebrow.

"Well, when I found out his father was trying to expose him as the spy he isn't, it only seemed fair to let him know that this was not his only plan to kill off his son."

Lucius stared openmouthed at Theo.

"It seems you have missed a lot while locked up in the manor, Father."

Just then, a loud, earthshattering scream echoed from the conference room.

"MY LORD! PLEASE FORGIVE - AHHH!"

Draco smiled triumphantly. "And that is my cue to leave. Have a good rest of your evening, Father."

He grabbed a handful of Floo powder, tossed it into the flames and was quickly sucked home.

Back at the flat, Hermione was going through Draco's drawers. For a while now, she kept catching herself packing some of his things in her bag, just in case, but she always lost her nerve at the last minute and put them back where they belonged. She did not want him to notice if things went missing, knowing very well that he would throw a fit. But she did not want to leave him behind when she left either. Hermione had wanted to ask him to come with her for a long time now, but had never mustered up the courage.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione was just about to reach back into her bag and return her favorite gray sweater of his to its drawer when she accidentally knocked Draco's satchel with her elbow. It landed upside-down on the floor, the many contents inside of it falling everywhere.

Hermione dropped to her knees and began picking everything up. Her fingers stopped when she came across something that looked like a diary. Unable to stop herself, she picked it up and opened to the first page. It was a list of names. They were written on several pages and, after that, nothing. The last name written was 'Alecto Carrow'. Before that was 'Anna Abbott', preceded by 'Marcus Flint'.

Hermione gasped. It was the names of his victims.

She quickly slammed the book shut before she could glimpse any names that she might recognize.

Just as she was about to put the pseudo-diary back in Draco's bag, Hermione caught sight of something else. A small, black bottle that had rolled halfway underneath the dresser. She picked it up and read the label. *Mortem Sibi ConscivitVenenum*. Suicide potion.

Hermione's hand began to shake, followed quickly by the rest of her body.

"OI! Hermione! You here?"

The sound of Bronson's voice echoing from the front room barely registered. And

then the alarm on the fireplace went off.

"Bronson, what are you doing here?" asked Draco's voice.

Looking towards the door, Hermione slowly began to rise, her grip on the bottle only tightening as she stepped towards it.

"Just looking for Hermione."

The alarm went off again, making Hermione freeze.

"The fuck you follow me here for, Theo?"

She began to walk again.

"I'm not going fucking home! Not after my father's whole 'it was all a bluff' bullshit."

Hermione opened the bedroom door, stepping out just as everyone turned to look at her. Her eyes immediately locked with Draco's.

"You all right?" he asked, noticing how ashen she looked.

She shook her head.

"What's wrong?"

He stepped forward but Hermione stepped back. Then she slowly began to raise her hand, exposing the black bottle to him.

"Draco, what is this?"

Draco stopped dead as he caught sight of what she was holding. He gulped. "Where did you get that?"

Hermione said nothing.

"Have you been going through my fucking things?"

"Answer the question."

"You answer the fucking question!"

Bronson slowly began stepping backwards towards the door while Theo did the same towards the fireplace.

Hermione breathed in deeply through her nose, eyes flaring as tears began to haze her vision. "What *the fuck* is this, Draco?" she said slowly and deeply. "Why do you have a *fucking* Suicide Potion in your bag?"

"Right, so I'm going to be heading to the Leaky Cauldron, mate," said Theo. "Feel free to follow me if you can." He could not throw in that Floo powder and get sucked away fast enough.

"And I'm going … just not here," said Bronson, turning on his foot and running out the door. Neither of them wanted to be present for the obvious bomb that was about to explode.

"That is none of your fucking business," said Draco as soon as they were gone.

"It is so my *fucking* business! Now, why do you have this?" she asked again, her voice becoming more shrill with each strained word that fell out of her mouth.

"Don't worry about -"

"Why, Draco?"

"Give it here, Hermione." He held out his hand and stepped forward, but she only hurried back into the room.

"Why?" she cried.

"You have no right to -"

"WHY?"

"It's for the day you fucking leave me, all right?" Draco shouted suddenly, his whole face turning bright red as his eyes became glossy and angry.

Hermione's jaw dropped. She gaped at him for a moment, tears now streaming down her cheeks.

After letting out a loud sob, Hermione quickly darted for the washroom.

Draco followed after her. "What are you doing?"

Hermione went over to the sink, turned on the water and began pouring the potion down the drain.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?" shouted Draco, running over and trying to

pry the bottle from her hands. "Let go! Let *the fuck* go!"

Hermione swung her free arm and slapped him hard across the face. When he flinched, she yanked the bottle from his hands and tossed it hard against the wall.

"No!" shouted Draco as he watched his salvation shatter in front of his very eyes. "What have you fucking done?" he screamed.

"How dare you, Draco!" Hermione said through clenched teeth. "How dare you *ever* purchase that potion!"

"Why do you care?" he spat, tears finally spilling from his eyes. "You're leaving! You're fucking leaving, Hermione, and you were already probably never going to see me again! It should not fucking matter what I do!"

"It matters!" she cried. "It *fucking* matters, Draco! How could you do this? How could you leave me after everything?" *Hiccup.* "After everything we've been through, you were just going to give up? Like none of this ever happened?"

"No, you don't understand! You fucking don't understand!" shouted Draco, rubbing at his eyes. "This was for you! I was doing this *for you*!"

Hermione whimpered. "What?"

"I wasn't just going to fucking off myself, Hermione! I was going to off *them*! All of them!"

"Them … them who?"

"Every Death Eater who ever fucking touched you! I was going to kill them, and then I was going to take that bloody potion before the Dark Lord had a chance to capture me! To torture me to death, or worse!"

"No." Hermione shook her head frantically. "No, that's not what I want. I don't care about vengeance, Draco. Not if it means I would have to lose you."

"You are already going to lose me!" Draco said coldly.

"No." Hermione ran forward and threw her arms around his waist. "No, no, no! I … I can't lose you, Draco. I *need* you. I do. If you died I … I wouldn't want to go on."

"Hermione, don't you dare talk like that."

"Draco, please …"

"You're spouting all this shit now, but what about when you're back with Weasley, huh? Will you still be thinking of me when you're fucking him?"

Hermione pulled away and looked sadly at him. "What?"

"That's the plan, isn't it?" asked Draco, nostrils flaring. "Leave here and going back to him? Because you love him, right?"

She did not answer.

"I have never once heard you say that things have changed," he said with disdain.

"They … they have."

"Really?"

"I don't … I mean, I'm not … Ron and I … I *do* love him but -"

"But what?"

Hermione's heart felt heavy as she gazed into his storm-cloud eyes, unable to say the words she so desperately wanted him to hear.

"Say it, Hermione."

Silence.

"Say it."

She whimpered.

"Say you're fucking mine!"

Before Hermione knew what was happening, Draco was kissing her hard, picking her up and slamming their bodies down on the floor in the same spot they had shared their first kiss. He tore off their clothes ravenously and immediately began pounding her into the cold, tile floor.

All the while Draco was shagging her hard in the spot that meant so much to him, he could not stop himself from shouting out possessive claims over her.

"You're fucking mine … I won't share. I won't fucking share with him … Mine … Fucking beautiful … Mine … Fucking mine!"

All the while, Hermione cried beneath him, hugging hard onto his neck as she was

still struck mute.

It was not long before Draco was coming inside of her, his movements slowing as he realized that he had not even tried to make her come with him. For the first time while shagging Hermione, he had been selfish. Completely and utterly selfish.

Hearing the sound of her whimpers, the realization of what had just happened suddenly overcame him. Had she even wanted this just now, or had he just taken her?

"Hermione … Hermione, what have I done?" He began to cry as he nuzzled into her hair. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm so fucking -"

Suddenly, Draco felt Hermione's soft hands cupping his face. She pulled it back so he was forced to stare into her swollen eyes.

"Draco, I … I'm yours."

"I don't want to possess you, Hermi -"

"It's not about possession, Draco," she said while stroking his damp cheek. "It's just how I feel. I'm yours and you're mine. Simple as that."

Gazing down at her, Draco began to cry harder as his heart suddenly felt light.

"I've known for a while now that I can never go back to Ron. Not like that."

"Why?" he cried.

"Because it's you I want, you fucking idiot!" Hermione attempted a smile.

Draco attempted one back and whimpered. "Merlin, I love it when that foul language comes out of your mouth." He began tracing her lips with his thumb. "When they don't sound angry, at least."

Pressing their foreheads together, Draco took several moments to just lay there and breathe her in.

"Come with me, Draco," Hermione suddenly muttered beneath him.

"What?" he asked, pulling back so he could look at her once more.

"Come with me," she repeated.

"Hermione, you … you know I can't."

"Why not?" she asked. "It's too dangerous for you to stay here and I … I want you with me. Please, just come with me."

"It may be dangerous for me here, but it will be even more dangerous for you if I come. The Dark Lord will never stop looking for me. No defected Death Eater has ever escaped him for more than a few weeks. I … I won't risk your safety like that."

Hermione sighed and wrapped her arms around him tighter. "Then I'm staying here. Indefinitely."

Draco chuckled. "What? Hermione, that's insane."

"Well, apparently *I'm* a bit insane, so I suppose it makes sense."

"You can't -"

"I'm not leaving without you, Draco."

Draco smiled before leaning down and kissing her. "You're not staying."

"Watch me."

<center>XXX</center>

Theo sat at a table in the Leaky Cauldron, drinking straight from the bottle of firewhiskey the girl beside him had bought for him. She smiled while taking another sip of her fruity cocktail, continuing to rub his thigh as she scooted her chair even closer to his.

"Evening, mate."

Theo looked up to see Bronson standing over their table.

"Fancy running into you here."

Theo rolled his eyes. "Th'fuck you doing here?"

Ignoring him, Bronson turned to the girl and smiled. "Oh, hello. I remember you. From the Knight Bus the other week, right?"

"Oh. You're the one with the girlfriend," said the girl with disdain.

"Yes, right. Off and on, that is," said Bronson, taking a seat beside her. He grabbed the bottle out of Theo's hand and took a swig. "Weren't the two of you supposed to meet here last week? Don't tell me this is a budding romance?"

Theo scoffed.

The girl did not seem to notice as she said, "I was unable to make it last week, so I have been coming here almost every night in hopes of running into him."

"And it looks like tonight is your lucky night," said Bronson brightly.

"Guess so," she said, smiling over at Theo.

"Whatever. I'm taking a piss."

Theo stood up and wandered off towards the loo. When he came back a few minutes later, Bronson had moved incredibly close to the girl and was rubbing her arm while whispering something teasingly into her ear. She quivered and leaned into his touch.

"What the fuck are you doing?" asked Theo, falling back into his chair. He took the bottle back and chugged it.

"I was just telling Tammy here how terrible it was of my girlfriend to speak to her like that. We were just discussing a little revenge."

Bronson raised his eyebrows, Tammy letting out a small moan as she bit her bottom lip.

"What do you say, Tammy?" he asked, leaning in and brushing his lips against her neck. "Should we go upstairs and put her in her place?"

Theo cocked an eyebrow. "'Scuse me?"

Bronson took a few Galleons out of his pocket and put them on the table. "I can't be seen going upstairs with you. Go ahead of me, get a room and have the innkeeper send someone over to give me the room number. I'll follow you shortly. If you're lucky, maybe Theo here will decide to join us." He looked at Theo and winked.

Without hesitation, Tammy picked the Galleons up from the table and ran off to find the innkeeper.

When she was gone, Bronson laughed. "Oh, slags. So hideously desperate."

"Seriously, what the fuck are you doing?" asked Theo, taking another swig from his bottle.

"Proving a point," said Bronson, tearing it out of his hands and taking his own swig.

"And what's that?"

Bronson gulped down his sip and put the bottle back on the table. "I just stole your girl for the night. Do you even care?"

Theo shrugged. "A Knut a dozen. I'll find another one."

"And that's my point," said Bronson, watching closely as Theo took the bottle back. "You don't even care. You don't care about your bloody slags because you're bored."

"What?" asked Theo, pursing his eyebrows as he took another sip.

"You're bored, Theo. Sure, you can go out and shag any girl you bloody want, but I doubt that this has given you any satisfaction for a long time. Am I right?"

Theo shrugged again. "A slag's a slag."

"So why shag them at all, when you can get just as much fulfillment jacking off your own bloody cock? Why waste your time?"

"Does it fucking matter?" asked Theo, putting down the bottle.

"It might."

Theo groaned. "Well, I'd rather have someone fucking there than no one."

Bronson smirked. "Is that all?"

"What are you getting at, anyway?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that you and Malfoy had the same bloody problem."

"Huh?"

Bronson took the bottle back. "He wasn't satisfied either, so he went and got himself a bloody girlfriend. But, somehow, I just don't see you going down that road. What you need is something else. Something different."

"Something like your fucking cock?"

Bronson's smirk widened.

"Not interested."

"Your actions over the past couple of weeks say otherwise."

Theo huffed. "Look, I was fucking drunk off my arse that night. I never would have let you do that if -"

"Drunk or not, I know you remember how hard you came that night."

Theo blushed before quickly turning away from him.

"Admit it. I satisfied you more than any slag has in a long time."

"No."

"You know I did."

"No," he repeated. "I'm not fucking gay, all right?"

"I know," said Bronson with a smile. "But that doesn't mean you're not curious about what I'm offering."

Theo blushed brighter.

"Excuse me."

Bronson and Theo looked up to see a young girl standing beside their table.

"Some girl asked me to give you this." She handed Bronson a folded piece of parchment and smiled before disappearing.

Bronson opened it and held it out for Theo to see. "Room five." He tossed the parchment in front of him. "It's all yours. I highly doubt that girl will care which one of us goes upstairs. She seems pretty easy going. Or just easy." He stood up. "I'm going out to the alley for a cigarette. You're free to join me if you'd like."

Bronson left then, leaving Theo alone to stare at that bloody piece of parchment. He picked it up and began twisting it in his hands, glancing all around as slags everywhere kept eyeing him.

"Fuck this."

He slammed the parchment down and took one last swig from his bottle before following Bronson out. When he got to the alley, the other wizard already had a lit cigarette in his mouth. He smiled and offered him one.

Theo took it and leaned against the wall beside him.

"I meant it when I said I'm not fucking gay," he said, lighting his cigarette and taking a drag.

"I know you did."

"But you're right. I'm bored. And I have no interest in going down the fucking same road as Malfoy."

Bronson smirked. "Sounds right."

"I'm not going to fuck you."

Now Bronson laughed. "Not yet." He tossed his cigarette down and put it out with his foot.

"No, not at all. I'm not - Th'fuck you doing?"

Bronson had dropped to his knees and was quickly undoing Theo's trousers. "Just a little gift from me to you. The last bloody one you're going to get without returning the favor."

"I'm not - Oh shit!"

Theo bit his lip to hold in his moans as Bronson engulfed his cock in his mouth. In the bloody fucking alley. Outside of the Leaky Cauldron. Where anyone walking by could bloody see.

Yet, the exposure of it all was part of what he found most gratifying. It was not long before he was coming, feeling the most satisfied he had since the last time Bronson did this.

When he was finished, Bronson zipped him back up and got to his feet. He kissed Theo then, happy to see he was not immediately pushed off.

Bronson pulled away and grinned. "If you want that again then you're going to have to work on your fucking attitude."

Theo said nothing.

Bronson rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. Pay for us to get a carriage and we'll go get your shit out of your psychotic father's house."

He began walking for the street. Theo hurried after him. "So you'll pay for some strange fucking girl to get a room for herself for the night, but you won't pay for a fucking carriage?"

"Yeah, I used Malfoy's money for that. He really needs to find a better hiding place."

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Draco leaned against the arm of the sofa while Hermione sat between his legs, both of them still naked with nothing but her favorite blanket to cover them. She had his diary in her lap and was currently writing names in it with a Self-Inking quill.

"So we have me, Bronson, Quigley, Andromeda and her whole group, and I think we should write Theo's name in here too."

Without waiting for a response, Hermione started scrawling the name 'Theodore Nott'.

After the two of them had calmed down a bit, she had asked him about the list he kept with the names of his victims. He supposed it was always meant to be a sort of tribute to them, and he had wanted to keep it all on record in case the war ever ended. So he could find and help their families. Anonymously, of course. He knew they would never accept help from a loved one's murderer.

Once she heard that, Hermione insisted in writing down all of the names of people Draco had helped over the years. It just did not seem right that he only had the bad things he had done on record.

"Who else?"
"Well, there was this resistance member we captured that I helped escape last year."

"Their name?"

"I'm not sure, but they went to school with us. They were in Hufflepuff."

"Were they in our year?"

Draco shrugged. "Hell if I know."

Hermione rolled her eyes and said, "Typical," before writing down 'Unidentified Hufflepuff'.

Just then, the front door burst open and Theo marched in carrying a suitcase. "Moving in, mate," he said, kicking off his shoes before heading for the guestroom without even so much as a glance at them.

Hermione's eyes widened as she pulled on all corners of the blanket to make sure it was fully covering her.

Not even a second later, Bronson walked into the flat holding a few pairs of shoes. He dropped them by Theo's other ones. "I have never seen a man with such a bloody obsession with shoes before." He went over and took a seat on the sofa. "So I know this is hardly ideal for the two of you but -"

"Fuck, Bronson!"

Bronson looked at Draco and raised his eyebrows. "Hmm?"

"Ever heard of fucking boundaries?" spat Draco, clutching the blanket tighter around them while Hermione blushed.

Bronson began scanning them up and down. "Oh. Are you naked under there, Hermione?"

She furrowed her brow and nodded.

"Fucking obviously!" shouted Draco.

"Sorry," said Bronson. He slowly turned so he was facing the other direction. "So I know this is hardly ideal for the two of you but -"

The front door burst open again and Quigley walked in. "What's everyone up to?"

Theo walked back into the front room and crossed his arms. "Do you have any other sheets? I hate your silky shit."

"No!"

"Seriously? There are no fucking extras?"

"You're not fucking living here, Theo!" shouted Draco, trying to turn around and look at him without exposing Hermione.

"Why not?" he whined. "The Dark Lord won't be able to get me another fucking place for a couple of weeks. You know he won't, and I can't fucking stay with my father anymore. You should have seen the fit he threw just now."

"It was pretty pathetic," said Bronson, turning back around.

"Malfoy, are you two naked?" asked Quigley.

Theo pursed his eyebrows before walking closer to them. "Oh, shit."

"Everybody, get *the fuck* out!" said Draco in a booming voice.

No one moved.

"Get out or I'm fucking going to stand without the blanket!"

Theo screamed and ran into the guestroom, slamming the door behind him.

"Wait, Malfoy, I feel this is important," said Quigley. "*Is* Hermione standing without the blanket too?"

"Fuck no!"

He shrugged, "I'm out," and left the flat.

Bronson did not budge, continuing to smile at them. "I have to admit, I've always been a little curious -"

"If you don't get out then I'm going to stand, Bronson," said Hermione, putting her hands on the top of the blanket.

Bronson shuddered. "All right, all right! I'll go!" He stood up. "Just keep the breasts covered."

When Bronson was gone, Hermione put her head in her hands. "We really need to talk to all of them about boundaries," she said.

Draco smiled and kissed her cheek.

She turned to meet his lips with hers. "You know you have to let Theo stay here."

Draco groaned. "I know. But I'm not getting him new fucking sheets."

"Yes you are!" Theo called from the other room.

Draco groaned louder. What a fucking horrible turn of events.

# Chapter 19: Money (That's What I Want)

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Draco and Theo stood with their arms crossed, staring intently at the items in the Black Market in front of them.

"Do you really think she would like one of these?" asked Theo, cocking his head to get a better look.

"She seems like the type, doesn't she?"

"I suppose. Probably had one of those family's that went and chopped one down on their own." Theo stepped forward and began walking through the array of Christmas trees. "So how do we pick one?" he asked. "The house-elf always did it at my house."

"Mine too," said Draco, staring around blankly. "I believe certain ones are meant to be more attractive than others."

Theo crinkled his nose. "They're fucking trees. They look the same."

"Are you two still over here?"

They both turned to see Bronson standing behind them.

"What's the problem?"

"Oh! He's common, I bet he knows!" exclaimed Theo, looking brightly at Draco. "Are certain trees more attractive than others?"

Bronson pursed his eyebrows. "Uhh … yeah. Are you two serious right now?"

They both looked at him and blinked.

Bronson rolled his eyes. "You want to find a bushier one, with the least amount of bald spots."

They blinked again.

"See how that one's all thin and has that big bare side in the back?" He pointed. "You want to avoid that."

"Huh … makes sense," said Draco, looking at Theo and nodding.

"So we just need to find the one most reminiscent of her hair then? Bushy with no bald spots?" Theo smirked.

"Funny," scoffed Draco. He then put his hand on his chin and began scanning a particular tree. "How about this one?"

Bronson walked up beside him. "Well, it's good, but …"

"But what?" he asked, glancing sideways at him.

"But it's about a foot taller than your ceiling, mate."

"So? Isn't the point of being a wizard that you can just shrink it down to the size you want?"

"Well, yeah, but that sort of takes away from fun of it."

"How is this fun?" asked Draco. He and Theo both looked at Bronson expectantly.

Rolling his eyes again, Bronson said, "Pick whatever fucking tree you want, Malfoy. It is obvious that this tradition is wasted on you. But let me be in charge of picking the ornaments. At least let *that* be fun for Hermione."

"You mean we're supposed to decorate the tree *ourselves*?" asked Theo with wide eyes.

"Who else?" said Bronson. "You don't have a bloody house-elf anymore, remember?"

Theo went white. "Oh shit."

"How about this one?" asked Draco, walking over to a smaller and very spirited tree.

Bronson nodded in approval. "That one's good."

Draco looked around and waved his arm to get the seller's attention. A witch in her late twenties walked over, looking nervous as she approached the obvious Death Eaters.

"Have you decided?" she asked.

"Yes, we would like this one," said Draco, "and the large one over there, as well." He pointed at the one he had been looking at before.

"Who's the large one for?" asked Theo.

"Who else do I bloody know?"

He thought about this. "Oh. Auntie dearest. Got it."

"All right. That'll be ten Galleons for the small one and twelve for the large."

"Bloody rip off," said Theo, crinkling his forehead.

"Oh, come on, Theo," said Bronson. "Smuggling all of these bloody things past you and the other Death Eater arses takes real talent, since you're all so superior. She should be rewarded for her cleverness." He winked at the girl and she blushed.

"Not really," said Draco. "Her mother is a Healer and the two of them are allowed out once a week to pick up herbs and such. My guess is that trees are on their bloody way. They just have to shrink them down, put them in a jar and call them something else. Something like pine-shrooms, which are often used to make potions meant for healing upset stomachs. Am I right?"

Draco smirked at the girl. She went white.

"If you're going to sneak more in, I suggest you come up with a better story next time. I'm not the one scheduled to check people in and out next week." He reached into his pocket and pulled out thirty Galleons. "Keep the change."

Color returned to the girl's cheeks and she smiled. "The stands are on me."

She shrunk both trees down and put them into a protective jar that would not let them rattle around or break.

After that was done, Draco and Theo followed Bronson around to pick ornaments.

He ended up choosing several that needed decorating, knowing very well that Hermione would enjoy the art project, even though her perfectionism would, undoubtedly, bring her a great deal of stress. She seemed to relish in stress, though. None of them could deny that.

Once the ornaments were chosen, along with a few other various Christmas decorations, they met up with Quigley, who had been doing some actual shopping. Then they all headed to Diagon Alley, where the busy streets full of Christmas shoppers made it easy for Draco to slip into the alley behind Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes unnoticed. He knocked and Cho answered, raising her eyebrows curiously.

"You've never come here in the middle of the day before. Is something wrong?"

"No, I just have no time to come later," he said, stepping inside. "I brought you all something." He reached into his bag and pulled out the jar with the larger tree in it.

Cho took the jar and smiled. "I assume it gets bigger."

"Obviously," scoffed Draco, reaching back into his bag and pulling out the decorations he had purchased for them.

"Thanks, Malfoy," she said. "Sometimes this place gets so dreary, it will be nice to have a little Christmas cheer to brighten it up with."

Suddenly, something crashed in the other room. "Ah, shit!" Oliver charged into the room, looking rather red in the face. "This isn't bloody working, Cho! Even with magic, we just don't have enough fucking parts for it to stay together!"

Draco looked between them and cocked an eyebrow.

"He's trying to build Teddy a little play area for Christmas. Only, we are sort of lacking in materials."

Oliver shook his hand and began sucking on his wounded thumb. He looked over and stared at Draco for a moment. Then his eyes began to widen. "What are you doing today?"

Staring at him curiously, Draco said, "I don't fucking know. I guess I'm Christmas shopping."

Oliver and Cho exchanged a look. "Could we come with you?" she asked suddenly.

Draco laughed. "No."

"Why not?" asked Oliver. "Dromeda doesn't want us going out of here without a firm purpose."

"Like buying food," said Cho.

"But if we're with you -"

"No," Draco repeated. "Besides, I'm not fucking alone."

"Is that other Death Eater with you?" asked Cho.

Draco nodded. "And two others. Not Death Eaters but -"

"Do they know about us?" asked Oliver.

"Sort of." Bronson did, at least. He was not sure what Quigley knew.

"Then what's the problem?"

Draco thought it was obvious, but he supposed he would have to spell this out for them. "It's fucking dangerous," he said. "The other Death Eaters are watching me even closer than they were before."

"Why?" asked Cho.

"None of your fucking business."

"Oh, Draco! I didn't know you were here." They all looked to see Andromeda walking down the stairs with a smile on her face.

"He brought us a Christmas tree," said Cho, holding it up.

"Oh, how lovely," said Andromeda, taking it and the ornaments from her.

"And Malfoy just invited us to go out holiday shopping with him," said Oliver.

Draco's eyes widened, turning his head slowly as he gave Oliver a cold stare. The other wizard just smiled.

"Would it be all right?"

Andromeda thought about this for a moment. "You'll be with them, Draco?"

"Apparently," he said, never taking his eyes off of Oliver.

"And is Theo with you?"

"He is."

"Well … I suppose that would be all right. If you all promise to be extra cautious."

"We will!" exclaimed Oliver, he and Cho already running upstairs to grab their cloaks.

"Make sure you disguise your bloody faces!" Draco called after them. Shit.

When he looked back at Andromeda, she was smiling. "You didn't actually offer, did you?"

"What do you think?" he said with a sneer.

"I think they need this. So *be* nice." She rubbed his arm affectionately before going upstairs with the tree and ornaments. Draco followed her.

In the main room, Draco helped Andromeda move stuff around so the tree would fit while Dennis and Kennil played Wizard's Chess. Teddy was, apparently, in the back room napping.

When Oliver and Cho came back out, they were both wearing their cloaks with some minimal alterations to their faces and hair. The two of them were not as recognizable as Hermione and probably did not need to make any changes at all, but better safe than sorry.

"We'll wait to decorate the tree until you get back," said Andromeda.

Suddenly aware that things were going on around him, Dennis looked up. "Where are you two going?"

"Out," said Oliver.

Dennis looked at Draco. "With *him*?"

"Not my fucking idea," said Draco.

"You're *really* letting this happen right now, Dromeda? Like, *seriously*?" he asked.

"I am," answered Andromeda. "I trust they will be safe with Draco."

"But -"

"We should get going," said Cho, practically skipping towards the stairs.

Oliver trailed after her with just as much joy in his step, while Draco groaned behind them.

When they got outside, he led them out of the alley and towards Flourish and Blotts where he was supposed to meet the others.

Inside of the bookstore, Draco immediately spotted Bronson flipping through a book like it was the most foreign thing in the world. He walked up to him.

"OI, Malfoy! You reckon our girl would like this one? The shop girl told me it's the most complicated book here, and I can't make heads or tails of it so she must be right."

"Who's your girl?"

Bronson looked up and only just now noticed the two people standing behind Draco. "Oh, Malfoy, you've brought friends. But, uhh … who are they?"

"More fucking fugitives," Draco said under his breath.

"Oh, lovely!" said Bronson, smiling brightly. "Welcome to our club. Though, I'm not one per se …"

"I hate fucking Christmas."

They all looked over to see Theo standing near them now, being pushed around by the busy crowd.

"No book is worth this shit." He turned to look at Cho and Oliver, blinking several times. "Don't I fucking know you?"

"Excuse me, Miss." Bronson grabbed the arm of the passing shop girl. She looked down at his hand and blushed. "Thank you so much for finding this book for me, but my friends and I are in a bit of a hurry and the line's rather long. Any way you can wrap it up for me?" He smiled charmingly and held up some money.

The girl looked into his eyes and giggled. "Of course. I will be right back with that." She took the book and the money, keeping her eyes on Bronson as she walked away, nearly tripping over some child in the process.

Bronson turned around to see everyone staring openmouthed at him, none more than Theo. "What?" He shrugged. "I'm good looking. Why would I *not* use that to my advantage?"

"Bloody hell, get me out of here!" Quigley was struggling to push through the crowd to get to them.

"Seriously, how do I fucking know you?" asked Theo, once again staring at Oliver and Cho.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Where was I just now, Theo?"

"The place I'm not allowed to mention."

"Right. And I just came back from there with two fucking people in tow. Now, how is it that you think you might *possibly* know them?"

Theo pursed his eyebrows. "School?"

"You're a fucking idiot."

"Here's your book." The shop girl stopped in front of Bronson, handing him a bag and his change. "And, uh … there's a little something extra in there too." She winked before scurrying off, trying to swing her hips seductively but ending up tripping through the large crowd and nearly falling on her arse.

"Let's get the fuck out of here."

Draco led the way out the door, which was actually pretty easy to get to since the crowd pushed them along like a bloody wave in the ocean.

"AIR!" shouted Quigley, throwing his arms up and breathing it all in.

"It's not as bad as last year, since no one from outside the bloody city can get in to shop," said Bronson, reaching into his bag and pulling out a piece of parchment with the shop girl's information on it. "Anyone want it, or should I just toss it into the rubbish?"

"How is it that you end up with some bloody witch's information every fucking time I'm with you?" asked Theo.

Bronson smirked. "No need to be jealous, Theo." He crumpled the parchment and tossed it towards the closest garbage bin. Nothing but net. "I get plenty when I'm not with you too." He winked.

Suddenly, Quigley was looking at Oliver and Cho. "Who are these people?"

"Friends of Malfoy's," said Bronson.

"Oh, Malfoy, I didn't know you had friends!" Quigley said brightly. "Other than your three charming companions for the day, of course -"

"Whoever said you were my fucking fri -"

"- and, uhh … Allie. Allie?" He looked around at everyone.

"Who the hell is Allie?" asked Bronson.

"Umm, your girlfriend," said Quigley.

Bronson thought about this. "Oh. Oh, right! Allison Darby. *My* girlfriend."

"Who are you all talking about?" asked Cho, pursing her eyebrows.

"*My* girlfriend," repeated Bronson with a smile.

Oliver and Cho exchanged a look.

"So what is it the two of you fucking need?" asked Draco. "Might as well get your shit out of the way first."

"Well, we need to go to the hardware shop and the toy shop," said Oliver.

"Ooh, toy shop." Quigley sucked air in through his teeth. "Think I'm going to have to skip that one."

"Bronson, we're going to have to use your abilities for that shop," ordered Draco.

"*What*?" whined Bronson. "Why can't you just show your bloody Dark Mark to get us to the front of every line? It works just as well."

"Not at fucking Christmas. People have tackled me for trying that before."

"They really did," confirmed Theo. "It was fucking embarrassing."

"So you're just going to pimp me out for front of the line privileges? I feel so bloody cheap."

"I'll buy you a bloody ice-cream cone then, so quit your fucking complaining," said Draco.

"*Oooh*, it had better be a double scoop," said Bronson with narrowed eyes.

They all went to the hardware shop first and were able to get in and out of there pretty quickly. Oliver and Cho bought a lot of large items, so Draco cast an Undetectable Extension Charm on the bag they had brought.

The toy shop was as horrific as they thought it would be. Luckily, there was, indeed, a young shop girl who was more than happy to help Bronson with whatever he needed.

"The power you hold," said Oliver as they left the store. "Is that teachable?"

"It's all about confidence," said Bronson. "You're good looking enough. You'll try the next one."

They went into Sugarplum's Sweets Shop next, Draco, Theo, Quigley and Cho all standing back while Oliver failed miserably at his attempt to flirt with the shop girl. Luckily, Bronson was there to pick up the pieces and got the job they needed done.

Glancing sideways, Draco could not help but notice the way Cho's hands curled into fists as she glared at Oliver talking to the other girl.

"Don't tell me you're jealous over Wood, Chang?" he asked.

Cho blushed. "No. Of course not. We're just friends."

Well, that was an obvious lie.

"Seriously?" said Quigley. "You're, like, way more fit than he is."

"This isn't how we normally look," she said, her blush only deepening.

"Right," said Draco. "You're normally better looking, and he's still an ugly git."

Cho smiled lightly. "I'm not jealous."

"Of course you're not." He winked.

"You know, no witches work in Quality Quidditch Supplies," said Theo. "If we go there next, it will be up to you to get us to the front of the line. Wanna see if he reacts?"

"No," Cho said quickly. She bit her lip. "Maybe. Let me think about it."

In the clothing shop they went to next, Oliver was much more successful in his flirting, and even managed to get their items purchased without Bronson's help.

As they walked out of the shop, Cho suddenly said, "Let's go to Quality Quidditch Supplies next. I'm sure Kennil would just love a broom, even though he'll only be able to fly it around the shop."

It seemed she had thought about it, and Cho definitely did not need any confidence training from Bronson. She had it down, and Oliver was not happy about it.

"You know, Chang really isn't bad to look at," Theo whispered to Draco as they left the shop. "I doubt Wood is ever going to make a move. Do you think she'd be down for a shag?"

Draco looked at him and pursed his eyebrows. "That's Potter's ex, Theo. She's fucking tainted."

"Oh, *ugh*!" shouted Theo, making a face. "Never mind."

Draco could not help but notice the way Theo glanced sideways at Bronson then, almost like he was making sure he heard them. He had, of course, because he was right fucking there.

"So are you all done then?" asked Draco as they all slipped into an alley so he could smoke a cigarette. Bronson, Quigley and Theo all bummed one. Surprisingly, Cho asked for one, as well.

"I guess we are," said Oliver.

"So does that mean you're not coming to the Muggle shops with us?" asked Quigley.

Draco's nostrils began to flare as he turned slowly and gave Quigley a cold stare.

"Muggle shops?" repeated Cho, taking a drag of her cigarette. "How exactly are you going to do that?"

"Well, they're not exactly guarded," said Bronson. "So we were figuring we would just let ourselves in. We actually only plan on going to an old record shop, but we might see what else is over there if time allows it."

"Music?" said Cho. "Oh, I love Muggle music! Could we go, Oliver? Please?"

"I … don't know," said Oliver. "When Dromeda gave us permission to come out, I don't think she expected us to ever leave Diagon Alley. How far is it from here?"

"Too fucking far," said Draco.

"Only a few blocks away," said Quigley.

Draco shook his head and sternly said, "No. You already got what you fucking came out here for. Time to go back to your cave."

"Oh, please don't make me go back there yet, Malfoy," said Cho with puppy-dog eyes. "I want to hear music. It's been so long."

"Aw, she wants to hear music, Malfoy," said Bronson, putting his arm around Cho and hugging her tightly against his side. "How can you deprive her of that?"

Both Oliver and Theo narrowed their eyes at the two of them touching.

"Please," Cho said again, now giving him a pouty lip.

Draco groaned. "Oh, fuck you all. Let's get this bloody over with."

Cho squealed and smiled triumphantly as Draco put out his cigarette on the wall. Everyone else followed suit and they all left the alley, heading to and through the Leaky Cauldron, coming back out on the Muggle streets of London.

There were quite a few people just outside of the pub but, after a few twists and turns, they were completely alone. Draco let Bronson and Quigley take the lead then, none of them stopping until they reached an old, Muggle record shop. Cho's eyes lit up when she realized they were real records, instead of the compact discs her generation was used to.

"Oh, I love vinyl. My grandpa used to always play me Billie Holiday. I really hope they have her."

After a quick wave of one of the wands Hermione had stolen from Fenrir Greyback, the six of them were inside the shop and roaming around. Quigley guided Draco to the back wall, where all of the record players were setup.

"Take your pick," he said.

Draco ended up choosing an older looking wooden one, while Cho chose a bright pink one for herself. He was really happy that Hermione would never pick something as loud and obnoxious as that. It simply was not her style.

"OI! Malfoy! You said the song's called 'Blackbird', right?" called Bronson, who was shuffling through the records.

"Yeah," said Draco, trying to ignore the way Cho was suddenly looking at him. It was obvious she knew the song.

"Here it is!" Bronson held up an album with a simple white cover. "Wanna listen to make sure?"

Without waiting for an answer, Bronson walked over to a record player that was already plugged in. He put the record on and set it to play the proper song.

Draco went over to it and listened. "Yes, that's it," he said after only hearing the first verse.

"Hey, Cho! I found that Billie Holiday bloke for you!" called Oliver, holding up an album.

Cho, who had still been watching Draco, walked over to him and took it. "Billie Holiday is a woman, Oliver."

Draco put the record player and the album into his bag, leaving some Galleons in a drawer behind the counter. He knew the former owners of this establishment would not be able to do much with wizard currency, if still alive, but he did not exactly have the means of getting Muggle money, so this would have to do.

When Draco turned around, Cho was suddenly standing behind him. He screamed. "Bloody hell, woman! What are you doing?"

She held some albums out to him. "Anyone who likes the song 'Blackbird' might enjoy these, as well."

Draco took the albums and looked at the covers. Eric Clapton. Bob Dylan. The Smiths.

"They're not exactly like it. That last one isn't even from the same decade, but the Weasleys have several albums that belong to a friend of theirs, and those are all among them."

Draco looked up and stared at her curiously. "Uh … Thanks."

Cho gave him a half-smile. "We're not idiots, Malfoy. We all know who else you've been hiding. And I assume that they are your plus one for Christmas?"

Draco said nothing.

"No matter," said Cho. "It's only a week away, anyway. I'll just wait to confirm my suspicions then."

Cho started to walk back towards Oliver, but stopped and did a double-take when she passed a rack with the more modern pop music on it.

"Ooh, the Spice Girls! I *love* them!"

The name alone let Draco know that he should be extremely happy he was not sharing his home with Cho. Oliver, on the other hand, should probably be afraid. Very, very afraid.

"You know, I just realized something," Bronson said suddenly. "I never got my bloody ice-cream cone!"

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Hermione hummed to herself while decorating one of her ornaments at the dining room table in the early morning hours. Draco had already left for his Death Eater duties, but Theo had the day off and was still hauled up in his bedroom.

Just then, his door opened and, without looking up from her task, Hermione said, "Morning, Sunshine. I left a pot of tea warmed up for you in the kitchen."

"Uhh … thanks," said Theo, heading straight there.

Hermione continued to hum while Theo poured himself some tea. He leaned against the counter and watched her in a fixed fascination while she poured glitter over the round orb and used her wand to make it continue to fall on the inside like tiny snowflakes. After another wave of her wand, she gave it a twirl, making sweet sounding music play around it while the inside of the globe began to look like a snowy paradise. Hermione smiled proudly.

"You know, I have to admit. Magic does make far better decorations." She stood up and went to hang her new ornament on the tree they had put up in the corner. While rearranging a few of the other ones so they were placed properly to be the most visually appealing, Hermione said to Theo, "I am going to need you to take me to the Black Market today to find a tree topper, as well as a few presents for Draco and the others."

Theo let out a loud, "Ha!" and said, "No. Unfortunately for you, I didn't wake up with a death wish."

"It's nonnegotiable, Theo," she said. "Bronson has already agreed to come along and play the part of my boyfriend. Now, we just need a Death Eater escort."

"No," Theo said again.

"I suggest you go and take a shower, because Bronson is going to be up here in twenty minutes."

"No."

Hermione turned towards him and frowned. "Now, Theo. Don't make this difficult."

"What happened to you calling me Nott?"

"Well, we're flatmates now. I figured that meant we could drop the formalities."

"Whatever. I'm still calling you Granger," he said while taking a sip of his tea. "And I'm not taking you to the Black Market."

Taking a few steps forward, Hermione kept her eyes on Theo and said, "You know, it would really be a shame if I let it slip to Draco exactly what it was that I saw in your head that night. You know. When you and Bronson were in your bedroom."

Theo stopped drinking his tea mid-sip. He gulped. "I was fucking drunk, all right? If you tell him then I will gladly use that fucking defense."

"Oh, and were you drunk in the alley the other week, as well?"

Theo froze. "What?"

Hermione smiled wickedly. "I didn't think so."

"Am I seriously being blackmailed by Gryffindor's fucking princess?"

"Looks like it," said Hermione. "Get in the shower, Theo. Now you only have seventeen minutes until we leave."

Theo narrowed his eyes and shook his head. "If I was not so proud right now, I would be bloody fucking pissed."

Hermione's smile widened as she took his cup from him.

"You've been spending too much time with fucking Malfoy." Theo went into his room and grabbed some clean clothes before heading for the washroom.

When he came back out, Hermione already had her appearance altered, and she and Bronson were waiting by the door with their cloaks on.

"I can't believe you fucking told her about the alley," hissed Theo while going into the closet and putting on his own cloak.

Bronson smirked. "Well, she knew she would need blackmail to get you out of here, so how could I ever just sit on such valuable information?"

Theo remained in a bit of a mood all the way to the Black Market. He mainly stood back while Hermione did her shopping, picking out a tree topper in the shape of a silver star first before searching for gifts. She wanted to get something for each person trapped in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, as well as something for Draco, Bronson, Quigley and even Theo.

Most of the gifts were easy enough, since she did not exactly have the option of going all out, but, when it came to Draco, she did not know where to begin. He was born rich and already had everything.

"Why not just get some lingerie?" suggested Bronson.

"I guess that's always a good failsafe," said Hermione. "But I was really hoping to get more creative than that."

"Then make him something, but lingerie is pretty much your only option if you're dead-set on paying money."

There was one compartment on the inside of the train that sold women's lingerie. They went to it and Hermione glanced around nervously while Bronson picked a few things out for her.

"How about this black one?" he asked.

Hermione looked at it and bit her lip. "I don't know," she said in a nervous voice.

"No," said Theo, speaking for the first time since they got there. "Get the green one over there." He motioned with his head. "It's Slytherin colors and festive. If you want to impress him then that's the one."

"Why thank you, Theo," said Bronson brightly. He grabbed the hanging negligee and pushed Hermione into a small dressing room, which was pretty much just a hanging curtain.

When she had it on, she called for Bronson to come and have a look at it.

"Va va voom," he said while poking his head behind the curtain.

Theo rolled his eyes. He began wandering around and took a look out at the rest of the train before heading back in, not even noticing as someone spotted him.

"Excellent choice," said Bronson, walking back over to him while Hermione changed back into her clothes.

"*You*!"

Theo and Bronson both turned to see an angry-looking girl pointing at Theo. Then she moved her finger to Bronson.

"And *you*! You fucking assholes!"

They both cocked their heads and stared at her blankly for a moment. Then it clicked.

"Oh, right!" said Bronson. "You're the broad from the Leaky Cauldron. Did you not enjoy your room?"

"I have never been so humiliated in all my life!"

"Really? Never?" said Theo, lifting an eyebrow.

"Fuck both of you!" she shouted, giving Theo a shove that caught him completely off-guard.

He stumbled back in the small space and tripped over something on the floor, sending him flying into the curtain Hermione was behind.

"What the -" She pressed herself against the mirror, wearing nothing but her bra and trousers as Theo landed on the floor. "Bloody hell, Theo!"

He gazed up at her, his eyes immediately freezing on the large scar marking her side. The one Pansy had left. Then he saw all of the others. Noticing this, Hermione grabbed her jumper and quickly covered herself.

"Get out!"

"Sorry," he said, blushing bright fuchsia as he got on his hands and knees and crawled out of there. When he got back to his feet, the girl was pounding her fists into Bronson's chest.

"Uh, could someone please get this mental slag off of me?"

"What *the hell* is going on out here?" shouted Hermione, coming out from behind the curtain, now fully clothed. She immediately locked eyes with the girl. "Why in Merlin's name are you hitting my boyfriend?"

"*You*!" The girl said that a lot.

"Do I know you or something?"

Theo cleared his throat and muttered, "Knight Bus," to her.

Hermione pursed her eyebrows. "Is this the slag who slept with Draco?"

He nodded.

"And then you tried to shag after?"

He nodded again.

"And did you?"

Now he shook his head. "Though, I did plan to."

"Then why *the fuck* did you leave me in a room all night by myself?" the girl shouted.

"As I recall, the plan was not for me to go up there," said Theo. "You're the slag who decided to switch men halfway through the night."

"Wait, switch men? What man?" asked Hermione.

The girl crossed her arms and motioned angrily at Bronson. "Your lovely boyfriend."

Hermione looked at him and crinkled her forehead. "Seriously?"

Bronson looked ashamedly to the floor.

"Was this the alley night?" she asked, looking between him and Theo.

Neither answered.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You and your bloody games, Bronson!" She marched back over to the dressing room and grabbed the green negligee. Then she went

over to the register, purchased it and put it in her bag. "The woman in me simply cannot defend the two of you any longer." She looked at the girl and said, "Have at them," before pushing past her and going off to look for any last minute purchases.

There was nothing else she wanted inside of the train but, just outside of the second to last coach, she found a vendor selling some mistletoe. The romantic in her just had to purchase some.

"I'll take two of these," said a familiar voice from a booth just to the left of her.

Hermione's heart stopped. She used her peripherals to watch closely as a hooded man handed over a few Galleons, taking two bottles of some vicious-looking green liquid in return. She could not see him at first, but then he turned to take a good look around, making sure no one was watching him. Neville.

His face was the same as Hermione remembered, but, even in the cloak, she could tell his body was much leaner, and his eyes were haloed by two dark marks. He was very pale, almost sickly, and something just did not seem right at all.

Draco had told Hermione what Ron had said. About Neville being taken by the Death Eaters several months earlier. She did not know what that could mean, but this was neither the place nor the time to confront him on it.

So Hermione bolted. She headed back inside the train, glancing over her shoulder and not noticing as she ran right into one of the burly wizards guarding the back coach.

"Sorry," she said, looking up into his eyes.

He made a throaty sound and nodded at her before stepping aside and holding the door open. Hermione stared into it blankly for a moment before looking back at the wizard. He motioned towards the door and said, "Third compartment on the left."

Well, this was interesting. Hermione was about to turn away when Neville walked right by her, staring curiously into the open door. In a panic, she stepped inside, jumping as the door shut behind her. Shit.

While Hermione knew Draco would kill her for going anywhere near the third compartment on the left, she had to admit she was mildly curious who was back there. And just who was it they were expecting to see? Surely it was not her they were looking for.

Hermione quickly gulped back her fears and took a confident step forward. The

first compartment on her left was empty but the one on the right was selling what appeared to be voodoo items. The vendor had a bone through the bridge of his nose and gave Hermione a look that sent shivers down her spine. She hurried past him.

The second compartment on the left had a man selling cigarettes, cigars, pipes, chewing tobacco. Everything Hermione hated. He must have been Bronson's friend. She thought she recognized him from Hogwarts but, seeing as Bronson and Quigley were a few years older, she did not know his name. On the right, there seemed to be some shady business deal going on with a lot of shouting. When they saw her, someone quickly slid the door shut.

Finally, Hermione arrived at the third compartment on the left. It was a bit dark in there, since the shades were drawn, and a lone person sat behind a counter, writing something in a notebook. There were many magical artifacts here, most creepy and quite reminiscent of Borgin and Burkes.

Unable to make the person out since they had a hood pulled over their head, Hermione stepped into the entrance of the compartment.

Without looking up, they said, "I was wondering when you were going to come and see me, Granger."

Hermione froze.

The wizard finally looked up and she was met with the familiar eyes of Blaise Zabini. Hermione knew he and Draco had been friends in school, but she had not heard him mentioned even once over the last few months. He definitely was not a Death Eater but, given the Slytherins' track record, she very much doubted he was on the side of good.

"Shut the door behind you, will you?"

Hermione took a step back, but someone suddenly pushed her from behind and she went stumbling towards the counter.

"I got it, darling," said a woman's voice. Hermione turned just in time to see Daphne Greengrass shutting the door.

"I believe you remember my wife, Daphne."

Correction. Daphne Zabini.

Hermione put her hand in her pocket and pulled out her wand.

Blaise and Daphne looked at each other and exchanged a laugh.

"Relax, Granger," said Blaise. "We only want to talk."

He and Daphne both took out their wands and put them on the counter.

"We won't even ask you to do the same."

"Oh, wait!" said Daphne, grabbing her wand back momentarily to transfigure two of their strange looking items into chairs. When she was finished, she put her wand back down and took a seat, smiling at Hermione as she patted the empty chair beside her. "Don't worry, Granger. We don't bite. Well … only each other." She looked at her husband and winked.

Hermione stayed standing and kept her wand aimed. "How did you know it was me?"

"Come on, Granger," said Blaise. "We went to school together for six years. Maybe we just recognized you."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Please. We barely knew each other."

Daphne looked at her husband and smiled. "Still sharp. I guess the rumors were false."

"What rumors?"

Ignoring her, Daphne reached over the counter and grabbed a pair of eyeglasses. "Put these on, Granger."

Hermione kept her eye on Daphne as she reached out and skeptically took them. She slipped them on. Blaise handed Daphne a small mirror, and she held it up for Hermione to look into. She gasped when she saw her normal face staring back at her.

"A friend of ours saw a strange girl here with Draco a few weeks back. Said there was something almost disturbingly familiar about her, so I put those on and went looking for you. Didn't take long since Theo was keeping you busy with his silly yo-yo tricks," said Daphne. "We picked those up from a wandering merchant a couple years back. Don't think he really knew what he had because, without those, we would pretty much be out of business." She put the mirror back down.

"Friend … what friend?"

"That's hardly important," said Blaise. "We're here to talk business."

"Business?" repeated Hermione, finally taking a seat but keeping her wand at the ready. "What kind of business?"

"While we do make quite a bit of money selling the many items you see before you," said Blaise, "our primary moneymaker is smuggling."

"Smuggling …" Hermione said, raising her eyebrows.

"Smuggling people," finished Daphne. "In and out of the city."

Hermione's jaw dropped.

Daphne reached out and nudged it shut for her. "We've been doing it for years but this curfew has really been working in our favor."

"I don't understand. Why …" What was it Hermione wanted to ask? "Why are you doing this?"

Blaise and Daphne exchanged another look.

"Just after the war, my mother's current husband tried to force me to become a Death Eater. So I fled," said Blaise. "Knowing that Daphne's father was trying to do the same, I went to her and she agreed to come with me."

"We were on the run for over a year before our families gave up," finished Daphne. "It was during this time that we started the little collection you see before you."

"When we knew our families really didn't care about us anymore, and they burned us off of our family trees, we came back here and began selling our items in the Black Market to make a living," explained Blaise. "While here, we began to hear stories about people becoming trapped in the city. Purebloods, Muggle-borns, even just Muggles who had no way of getting out."

"We already had our own escape route for our in and out visits, so we began helping them," said Daphne. "Before long, it became a business."

"And, as a runaway slave, we're pretty positive you're in need of our services, Granger."

"While I'm sure Draco has been really useful in keeping you alive," said Daphne, "I highly doubt he has clue on how to get you out."

Hermione's wand hand finally easing, she glanced back and forth between the two and said, "I don't have any money."

"But Draco does," said Blaise with a growing smile.

"I could never ask him to do that."

"Why not?" asked Daphne. "Do you think keeping you alive so far has been free for him?"

Hermione sighed and looked down at the wand Draco had given her. She ran it through her fingertips. "I'm not interested."

When she looked up, Daphne was looking at her very seriously. "Is this about Draco and you shagging?"

Hermione turned bright red. "W-what? I don't know -"

"There's no need to pretend. I already overheard him and Theo talking about it. He does *not* approve." Daphne looked at Blaise and they both chuckled.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione stood up from her seat. "Thanks but no thanks." She turned towards the door.

"Granger, wait."

Hermione looked over her shoulder to see Blaise suddenly looking very serious. "You can't stay here," he said. "Potter is waiting for your return to attack and you know it."

Hermione turned back around and cast her eyes to the floor. "I do."

"You probably already know this," said Daphne, "but my sister, my *baby* sister, was forced to become a Death Eater the other week, and I need this bloody war to end before she's forced to do something she'll never forgive herself for."

"If you love your sister so much then why did you leave her behind in the first place?" asked Hermione, looking Daphne square in the eye.

Daphne went red. "I was young, and I truly did not believe my father would do this to his favorite daughter. But I was wrong and Astoria is living with the consequences."

"So the two of you need me to leave, then. Is that what you're saying?"

Daphne looked at Blaise. He nodded at her and said, "Yes, that's what we're saying?"

"And you had the nerve to try and *charge* me?" said Hermione, putting her hands on her hips. "You two are Slytherins through and through."

Blaise and Daphne both looked back at her, smiled and said, "Thank you," in perfect sync.

Crossing her arms now, Hermione said, "While I feel for your situation, I'm not going to be leaving the city unless Draco comes with me."

"Ha!" Blaise laughed loudly. Daphne gave him a sharp look and he quickly sucked it up. "Sorry," he said, "but Draco's not going anywhere. Or, rather, he shouldn't. He's the snaky bastard's favorite. If he runs then they will hunt him down and you can safely bet that his death will not be a pleasant one. And if you're caught with him … well, I can't imagine yours will be much better. Draco knows this. He's not stupid."

Hermione sighed. "Look, I know it's dangerous, but there are Death Eaters who are dead set on getting him executed. I won't leave him here."

Hermione looked over at Daphne, who was staring at her quite curiously. "Are you two in love or something?"

This time, Hermione did not even blush as her eyes became vacant and her heart felt heavy. She knew she loved Draco, but '*in love*'? That was something she simply was not ready to admit.

Without saying anything, Hermione turned to leave again. She put her hand on the door.

"Granger."

She turned back towards Blaise. He tossed her something and she caught it. It was a bumpy stone the same color as the inside of a red abalone shell.

"If there comes a time when you need to get out of London quickly, that stone will Apparate you to this very compartment."

"But Apparition is impossible in the city," said Hermione.

Blaise grinned. "Not with that stone, it isn't. While holding it, just Apparate as you normally would and it will take care of the rest."

"And it works for two. If necessary," added Daphne. She smiled. "But keep in mind that there are no package deals. If there are two of you then we will charge for two."

Hermione smiled back. "You're still charging me even though you need me to leave?"

Daphne shrugged. "Girl's gotta eat. It's not like Draco will miss two-hundred Galleons. That's the price, by the way. One-hundred each."

"Seriously?" said Hermione, raising her eyebrows. "And are most fugitives able to come up with that sort of money?"

"Most fugitives don't have a rich pureblood aiding them," said Blaise with a smile. "It's a case by case basis."

Hermione rolled her eyes. She pocketed the stone and opened the door.

"See you soon, Granger!" Daphne called after her.

"And tell Draco we said hello!"

They both laughed as Hermione headed back down the coach, not looking into any of the other compartments as she headed back to the main area of the train. Without stopping, she walked right out of it and back onto platform 9 3/4. Then she was through the wall and in the main area of King's Cross Station, heading to the closest bench and taking a seat on it.

Hermione's eyes began to mist as she took the new stone out of her pocket and stroked it with her fingertips. She had an out. A way to get to Harry and Ron. As much as she hated to admit it, she truly believed that Blaise and Daphne were legit. Draco would be suspicious, of course, but that was not saying much since he had been suspicious of his own best friend. Still was.

Before long, Hermione had spaced out staring at that stone. She barely noticed as someone walked up and sat down beside her, but she did not have to look up to know that it was Theo. He was giving her those pitying eyes she hated so much, probably thinking about the scars he had witnessed for the first time.

"Don't look at me like that, Theo. The last thing I need is someone like *you* feeling sorry for me."

"Where'd you disappear to?" he asked, turning his head so he could avoid looking at her completely.

"Nowhere."

"What's that in your hand?"

"Nothing," she said, putting the stone back in her pocket.

"Right," said Theo, looking forward once again. A long moment of silence passed between them. "So … those scars of yours. The ones on your side."

Hermione's breath hitched.

"It's a curse, right?"

She nodded.

"I know that curse. The scars never heal and leave you in constant pain." Theo's face became strained as he began to fidget with his hands. "Are you in constant pain?"

Hermione glanced sideways at him and sighed. "I suppose I am. But I've had them for so long that I think I've gotten used to it."

"Who gave them to you?"

"Pansy Parkinson."

"Oooooh," said Theo. "Makes sense."

"What does?" she asked.

"Why Draco has been acting so harshly towards her. Don't get me wrong, he's never been the nicest of bloke's to her, definitely shagged her and left her on more than one occasion, but, even so, they were still friends. He may be an arsehole, but he cared about her. Now … well, it doesn't really seem like it anymore."

"Good," Hermione said with disdain.

Theo bit his cheek. "It's not like I'd ever defend Pansy or anything, and I don't know when she gave those to you, but she's changed a lot since becoming a Death Eater. She's miserable. And lonely. Some people just aren't cut out for this business."

Hermione frowned. "Well, it certainly sounds like you're defending her."

"Yeah, well, we both have shit fathers who put us in shit situations. Guess I have

to feel some sort of kinship with her."

Theo reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. Hermione looked at them and crinkled her nose.

"Don't tell me you've picked up that horrible habit too?"

"Really takes the edge off," he said while lighting one.

"Does it?" asked Hermione, taking it from him and bringing it to her lips.

"Ooooh no!" shouted Theo, quickly grabbing it back. "Draco's already going to kill me for bringing you here. No need to add torture to that before he finishes the deed."

"Maybe he'd like it if I picked up the habit. That way, he could do it more often again."

"And it's remarks like that that make me wonder if you know him at all."

Hermione felt her eyes begin to mist as the realization of this hit her. Maybe she didn't really know Draco. But she wanted to learn. She wanted to know everything about him. But she needed time. Something she was running out of. Especially if he would not come with her.

"Holy shit, are you crying?" asked Theo, looking at her in a panic. "No, no, no! What did I say?" He tried to replay his words in his head.

"No -" *Hiccup*! "N-nothing!"

Theo sighed. He looked around uncomfortably as he lifted his arm and began patting her on the back, nearly knocking her forward.

"What are you doing?" asked Hermione.

"Being comforting," answered Theo, continuing to pat.

"Well, you're doing an awful job of it." She chuckled through her tears.

"Merlin, the two of you are so bloody alike sometimes …"

Hermione grabbed his arm and began moving it so he was rubbing smooth circles on her back instead. "That is how you comfort people, Theo."

"Hmm … I can see why that might be more pleasant," he said with a smile before

putting his hand back in his lap. He took a drag of his cigarette. "So are we done here?"

"Where's Bronson?"

"Dealing with that crazy broad. Oh, wait! Is that why you're so upset? Because your boyfriend almost cheated on you?" He smirked.

Hermione smiled. "What do you mean *almost*? He *did* cheat on me. You were there, remember? In the alley?"

Theo's face dropped. "You better shut your fucking mouth."

Hermione began to laugh. "Don't worry. Secrets safe with me." She zipped her lips.

"So if we find him, *are* we done?"

"I don't know," said Hermione with a sigh. "I was really hoping to find Draco a better present. I mean, obviously he won't mind Bronson's idea but … well, it's not very clever. But what do you get someone who already has everything?"

"Let me sleep on it," said Theo, taking another drag. "I'm sure we can come up with something brilliant. But, either way, wear the outfit."

Hermione smiled and rolled her eyes. "Men are so easy."

Noticing Hermione was still looking a little down, Theo lifted his arm and began rubbing her back again.

"Aww, are we hugging?" asked Bronson, suddenly coming up behind them. "Mind if I join in?" He threw his arms around both of their shoulders and squeezed them together.

"I'm really not much of a toucher," said Theo, struggling to get out of the three-way hug.

"Yes, I've noticed," said Bronson, only squeezing him tighter.

"Let go."

"This is what we call hugging therapy, Theo. It's good for you."

"Let g -"

"Just accept it."

Theo let out a heavy huff of breath as Bronson continued to hug him, Hermione laughing on his other side.

"So are we ready?"

"Yes," said Hermione, standing up as soon as his grip loosened on her. Theo put out his cigarette.

As she began to walk, Bronson hurried to catch up to her, throwing his arm around her shoulders. "What's wrong, sugar plum? You're not upset over that other girl, are you?"

Hermione giggled. "Somehow, I think I'll get over it."

"So you're not breaking up with me?"

With a smile, Hermione wrapped her arm around Bronson's back and rested her head against him. "No, Bronson. You can still be my outside boyfriend."

"Yay!"

"What happened with that girl, anyway?" asked Theo, suddenly appearing beside them.

Bronson shrugged. "Dunno. I just said whatever to get rid of her. I actually think we might have a date tomorrow." He sucked in air through his teeth. "She's probably going to be waiting a while."

"Bronson, you're awful!" shouted Hermione, giving him a playful shove.

He laughed. "What? Gotta keep the mental bitch happy in the moment."

Arm still around Hermione, Bronson threw his other one around Theo and pulled him close.

"What are you doing?" asked Theo, trying to pull away again.

"Your father never hugged you as a child, did he?"

"Of course he didn't."

"Hmm … figures."

Stopping his struggling against the firm grip, Theo decided to just give in and let this happen. Really, it was not that bad. Kind of nice to have people in your life

you could trust enough to not have to look over your shoulder the entire time, and Bronson and Hermione were just that. They were not out to get anyone. They were just … nice. And that was something completely new and different for him. He was starting to understand why Draco was so drawn to them. It was because people like them made him feel … almost normal.

# Chapter 20: Christmas Time (Is Here Again)

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"What do you think?" asked Hermione, stepping out of the washroom and letting Draco look her over while he sat impatiently on the bed. Currently, the song '*Blackbird*' was playing on the record player Hermione had unwrapped about an hour earlier. She pretty much had it on repeat, but the song made her so happy that Draco could not even get angry about it. Even though his insides were currently cringing.

"You look fine, Hermione."

"Really?" she asked. "You don't think it looks like I'm trying too hard with the red?" She looked down at the jumper she was wearing and tugged at the bottom.

Draco chuckled. She really was ridiculous. "Since when is being festive considered trying too hard?"

"Okay." Hermione finally let go of the jumper. "And you're sure my hair looks all right up like this?" She began fidgeting with it.

"Yes, Hermione." Draco stood up from the bed and began walking over to her. "All of you looks all right." He reached her and put his arms around her waist, pulling her close and giving her a tender kiss. "You look beautiful."

Suddenly, Draco felt Hermione tense in his arms. He opened his eyes to see her staring at him, her expression almost fearful.

"What?" he asked.

Hermione gulped. "Nothing. It's just … well, you've never said that to me before."

"Said what?" he asked. "That you're beautiful?"

She tensed again.

Draco smirked. "Do you not like it when I say that?"

"N-no," she muttered. "It's fine."

"Then why are you looking at me like I just told you I murdered a puppy?"

"I-I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not," she said a bit more confidently. "I just …" She sighed. "No one has ever said that to me before."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "No?"

Hermione shook her head. "No."

He smiled, kissed her forehead and said, "Well, you are."

She blushed.

"Stop being so fucking bashful and just take the compliment."

Hermione shook her head and gave him a small smile. "That mouth of yours."

She pulled away, but Draco grabbed her wrist and yanked her back, crashing his lips into hers and kissing her with an incredible vigor that sent delightful sensations running all throughout her body.

"What was that you were saying about my mouth?" he said between parts of their lips.

"Nothing," she said while smiling against him, moving her hand into his hair and running it between her fingertips.

Before Hermione knew what was happening, her trousers were off and Draco's were undone. He slammed her against the wall, lifted one of her legs and immediately began thrusting into her. Draco put his free hand behind Hermione's head so that the hairstyle she had worked so hard on would not get ruined. Their lips did not part once during their quick shag, and when Hermione came, Draco

could not help but do the same.

While catching their breath, Draco stroked Hermione's cheek, keeping his eyes open as he kissed her tenderly. "I think this is when you look the most beautiful," he said with a smirk. "After screaming my name."

Hermione blushed and gave him a playful shove.

Draco chuckled and kissed her again, relishing in the sweet taste of her tongue as it pressed against his. Not once did he close his eyes, wanting to see the serene look on her face as she got caught up in these moments of theirs. It was no wonder the words that next came out of his mouth flowed so naturally.

"I love you."

Hermione's lips froze. She slowly opened her eyes, her eyelashes fluttering as she gazed back at him, looking both horrified and delighted at the same time. The mix of emotions was a bit much for her and she ended up bursting into tears.

"Oh, shit. Hermione, no, I'm sorry," said Draco while trying to wipe the tears from her eyes. "I don't know where that came from. Don't be upset."

"I-I'm not," she said while shaking her head. "Are you taking it back?" She hiccupped. "Please, please don't take it back."

Draco smiled and kissed her cheek. "Relax, Hermione. I'm not taking it back. I meant what I said."

Hermione nodded, tears still falling from her wide eyes as she leaned forward and kissed him. She pressed her forehead against his and said, "Draco, I … I'm not …"

"Ready," he finished. "I know. I wasn't expecting you to say it back."

Hermione sobbed, her hands running up his chest and clinging to his jumper. She had not told him about Blaise and Daphne, or how she had been offered a way out. But the closer she got to him, the more she dreaded leaving. She loved him. She knew she did. But saying it made it too real and, as soon as those words escaped her lips, she knew that leaving him was no longer going to be an option.

After cleaning themselves up, Draco and Hermione walked out to the front of their flat hand-in-hand.

"You know, you two really need to remember to put up a Silencing Charm," said Theo, who was reading a Potions book Hermione had gotten him on the sofa.

"You have a flatmate now, remember?" He looked up at them and winked.

Hermione blushed, but Draco put his arm around her waist and said, "Heat of the moment, Theo. If it bothers you that much then use the wand Hermione gave you to put one up yourself."

"Doesn't bother me at all," said Theo, looking back down at his book. "I've heard you shag before. Even been in the same room once or twice. I just thought it might bother *her*." Without looking up, he nodded towards Hermione.

She blushed brighter and walked with her head low towards her small bag that was on the kitchen counter. "Are you ready, Theo?" she asked.

"Yeah, whatever," he said. "Still don't know why you're dragging me to this."

"Cho and Oliver invited you," she said.

"Only because they wanted to invite Bronson so he would cook, and Quigley's his best mate, Draco was already going. It would've been rude not to."

"I don't know whether or not that's true but, either way, we're not leaving you alone on Christmas."

"Why not?" he asked. "I've spent the majority of my Christmas's alone. I'm used to it."

Hermione looked at him and frowned. "Well, then I would say it is about time you started a new tradition, Theo. Now, stand up. We're already running late."

Theo chuckled. "If we're running late then that definitely has nothing to do with me. I was out here and waiting at the precise time you told me to be." He put his book down and stood up. "All right, let's get this over with."

They all put on their cloaks and shoes, and Hermione made minor alterations to her appearance before heading out the door. Bronson and Quigley were already waiting outside of their flat with bags of food.

"Bout bloody time," said Quigley. "I thought we were leaving at eleven on the dot."

Hermione blushed again, keeping her eyes on the ground as she opened her small bag for them to put their food in.

"Uh oh, Quigs. I know that blush," said Bronson with a wide grin. "She and Malfoy must've had a quick shag." He looked at Theo. "Did they forget a Silencing Charm

again?"

"Th'fuck do you think?" said Theo, already taking out a cigarette and lighting it. He only got in one drag before Bronson was taking it from him.

"I'm out," said Bronson, who obviously had no intention of giving it back.

"Bloody fucking moocher," mumbled Theo before taking out and lighting another one.

The five of them headed outside, where a carriage Theo had ordered was already waiting for them. They all climbed inside, Hermione sitting near the window and gazing out of it while clutching tightly onto Draco's hand. She had not been in a carriage since the slave trade and felt a bit strange about it. While she may not have been chained in the back anymore, the ride felt just the same, minus the clammy but strong hand holding onto hers.

"You all right?" asked Draco, rubbing her knee.

Hermione looked at him, smiled and nodded. She did not want him to know that she was actually really nervous to see everyone. While she had not been particularly close with any of the resistance members they were going to see today, she still knew all of them. This was almost like a practice for when she saw Harry and Ron again. They would ask her questions, of course, and she needed to find the best ways to answer them. Without making everyone feel horribly uncomfortable around her. That was her greatest fear, that no one would be able to act normal once they realized what she had gone through, babying her, walking on egg shells. She dreaded it all.

The carriage stopped in front of the Leaky Cauldron and the five of them got out, Draco going up and paying the cabby while Bronson took hold of Hermione's hand, swinging their arms to and fro to try and ease her nerves.

"Come on, Kitten. Show me a smile," he said while putting an arm around her.

Hermione gave her best attempt, but it still was not very good.

When Draco rejoined them, they all headed inside and found a table. In case anyone they knew was here, they wanted to sneak into Diagon Alley without being too obvious. After a quick drink, Hermione and Draco slipped out first.

Even though the streets of Diagon Alley were completely deserted for the holiday, they still stayed in the shadows, both of them keeping their faces hidden under hoods as they walked hand-in-hand, Draco positioning himself protectively in front

of her at all times.

This was the first time Hermione had been to Diagon Alley in years. It made her sad to see the pavement was horribly battered and many shops were still boarded up with broken windows and foul words painted in large, red letters. Draco assured her that it did not look so bad when people were around, but she doubted it ever looked as glorious as the first time she had come here, bright-eyed and eager to enter the world she had just learned existed.

When Draco and Hermione arrived at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, they snuck around the back and Draco let her do the knock signaling their arrival.

Hermione took a deep breath before lifting her fist and doing the complicated knock Draco had taught her. As soon as she was finished, she stepped back and grabbed onto his arm, halfway hiding behind him as the door began to open.

"You're late," said Andromeda, smiling widely as she stood aside so the two of them could enter.

Hermione took Draco's hand and squeezed tightly as they began to step forward.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Draco turned to her and asked, "Do you want to change your appearance back now?"

Hermione nodded slowly. She gave Draco her wand and let him undo everything she had done before removing her hood and turning towards Andromeda.

"Hello, Andromeda," she said while attempting to smile. The butterflies that seemed to have permanently made a home in her stomach had never felt so large before.

Andromeda had tears in her eyes as she stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. Hermione's body was shaking as she slowly reached her hands up and hugged Andromeda back. She really was not used to this. The only people who had touched her like this in years were Draco and Bronson, and it had taken her a while to adjust to that.

"Thank Merlin you're all right," Andromeda said into her ear. "Harry and the Weasleys will be so happy when they are finally able to see you again."

Draco tensed. "You made sure to prep the others before we arrived, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes," she said. "They all know not to speak of anyone who crosses their paths today. Both of your safety is the most important thing to us."

"*Both* of our safety?" said Draco, cocking an eyebrow.

Andromeda pulled away from Hermione but kept a hold on her, bringing her hand up to tuck a curl that had fallen loose from her pinned style behind her ear. "Well, it's the most important thing to me, and I'm sure everyone else wants to get Hermione back to her friends as safely as you do." She looked at Draco and winked. "Are you ready to go upstairs, dear?" she asked while taking Hermione's hands.

Hermione looked over her shoulder at Draco and bit her lip.

"Need a moment?" he asked.

"Can we wait for Bronson and the others?" she asked.

Draco smiled and shrugged.

"Yes, of course. We can do whatever you want," said Andromeda, finally letting her hands go. "Would you like it if I went upstairs and brought Teddy down first? I know how close you were with Nymphadora and Remus, and he has heard so much about you from his godfather over the years."

For the first time since they got there, Hermione looked really excited. "Yes, that would be absolutely lovely."

Andromeda smiled and headed for the stairs. "I will be right back then."

As soon as she was gone, Draco wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist and pulled her against him. "A bit nervous, are we?" he asked with a smirk.

Hermione plopped her forehead against his chest and said, "You have no idea."

Just then, there was a knock at the door. It was very similar to the knock Andromeda had made up to get in, but still completely wrong.

"That's not fucking it!" called Theo's voice from the other side. "It's like this." More knocking.

Wrong again.

"Yeah, that's definitely not it," said Bronson's voice. "Except for the end. Maybe my knock's beginning and your knock's end?"

He tried that. Even more wrong than before.

"No, no, no. You're both idiots," said Quigley's voice. "It's like this."

Halfway through his incorrect knock, Draco shouted, "For fuck's sake!" He let go of Hermione, went over to the door and threw it open. "You're *all* fucking idiots," he said while pulling them inside.

"Draco, we heard a lot of incoherent knocking upstairs," said Andromeda, walking down the stairs with Teddy in her arms. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh, nothing," he answered. "I'm just forced to rely on a bunch of fu -" He looked at Teddy and gulped back his foul language. "- idiots," he finished.

Hermione's eyes lit up when she saw the small child in Andromeda's arms. He looked at her with interest before brightly saying, "Hi! Hermimee?"

Hermione smiled. "Close enough." Much closer than Viktor Krum had been, at least.

"Unky Hawwy talks about you a lot. He says the two of you and Unky Won went on all sorts of aventures!"

With a chuckle, Hermione said, "I suppose we did. Many years ago, that is. I haven't seen either of them in a very long time."

"But soon, right?" asked Teddy, struggling so his grandmother would put him down.

"Yes, soon," said Hermione, following his descent to the ground with her eyes.

Teddy took her hand and immediately starting pulling her towards the stairs. "Did you know Unky Hawwy and Aunt Ginny are going to get mawwied? When the war is ova."

Hermione looked back at Draco nervously as she and Teddy began to ascend the stairs. He laughed before briefly introducing his aunt to Bronson and Quigley. Then he followed her up.

Teddy was still chatting animatedly as he walked into the main room on the second floor, dragging Hermione along with him.

Everyone looked up as they entered, Hermione stopping dead in her tracks as she stared around the room nervously. Draco came up behind her and put a hand on the small of her back to keep her steady.

Cho was out of her seat first, running over and pulling Hermione into a hug. "We knew it was you," she said, looking over Hermione's shoulder at Draco and giving him a wink. "Thank Merlin you're all right."

When she pulled away, Oliver was right there to claim the next hug. Draco could not help but smirk at how uncomfortable Hermione looked. But this was good for her. She was not used to people anymore and, once she escaped the city and found her way back to the resistance, she was going to be surrounded by them. Might as well get used to it now.

As soon as Oliver was finished, Dennis was standing right there, staring at her strangely while he kept his hands firmly in his pockets.

"So … it's really you? Malfoy, he …" Dennis gulped. "He rescued you."

"I never said I rescued her," said Draco.

Hermione looked back at him and said, "Yes you did."

"No," he said. "I *found* you. You rescued yourself."

"But you found me right when I was in danger of getting recaptured, and you've taken care of me ever since. It counts."

Draco smirked. "Whatever you say."

"Are you going to hug me now, Dennis?" asked Hermione, looking back at him. "Or are you waiting to see if Polyjuice Potion wears off and I'm actually someone else?"

Dennis went white for a moment before opening his arms and leaning in. "I'm really glad you're all right," he said quietly into her ear.

"Thanks, Dennis." When they pulled away, she really looked at him. "Merlin, I can't believe how tall you've gotten. Definitely taller than Colin."

"Yes, well, most people are," he said with a smirk.

Pushing past everyone to get off of the stairs he was stuck on, Bronson grabbed Hermione's bag out of her hand and said, "Should we start cooking?"

Hermione smiled and nodded. "Dennis, this is Bronson, head chef today. I'm playing sous chef."

"Nice to meet you," said Bronson, shaking his hand. Suddenly, his eyes fell upon Kennil standing a few feet away. His jaw dropped. "Y-you're Kennilworthy Whisp."

Kennil smiled. "I am."

"Holy cannoli, Malfoy didn't tell me you were here!"

"Oh, isn't that adorable. Even his wordplay is food related," Cho whispered to Hermione.

Bronson hurried forward and began shaking Kennil's hand urgently. "I am *such* a big fan. Would you mind being a line cook so that we could discuss the great changes in Quidditch after the arrival of the golden snitch?"

Kennil chuckled and said, "Sure. I have been told I am an excellent chopper."

"Could I be a line cook, as well?" asked Cho. "I would love to learn some of your tricks in the kitchen for the days when we're not graced with your presence."

"Of course," said Bronson, already walking towards it.

"Me too! Me too!" shouted Teddy, once again grabbing ahold of Hermione's hand and pulling her along with him.

"So did you open your presents yet, Hermione?" asked Cho as she grated cheese.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, I opened them this morning. Thank you for helping Draco pick out some records for me. I haven't listened to all of them yet. Just '*Blackbird*'."

"All bloody morning!" Draco called from the other side of the room.

"Seriously," said Theo. "I thought those black things had multiple songs on them."

Hermione chuckled. "I suppose that means they're already sick of it."

"Hold out your hand."

Hermione looked over to see Bronson pouring a bit of salt into Teddy's outstretched hand. He lifted him up and held him over a pot on the stove.

"All right, kid. Toss it in."

Teddy did just that, laughing joyously as Bronson began to praise him.

Right then, Theo walked over and began picking at the cheese. Hermione slapped

his hand away.

"Awesome, kid! High five!"

They all looked over to see Bronson and Teddy smacking hands.

Cho sighed. "He really is adorable, isn't he?"

"Teddy?" asked Hermione. "Of course. He has good genes."

"Not *Teddy*, Hermione. Bronson." She smiled. "Such a shame that someone so pretty will never go for me or you. Nott has a chance, though."

Theo began to choke on the cheese he had stolen, despite Hermione continually slapping his hand. Luckily, Cho did not seem to notice.

"Do you think he's ever been with a woman?"

Hermione blushed.

"He was only with women until he was, like, nineteen or something," Theo said suddenly.

Cho looked at him curiously. "Really? That wasn't that long ago, was it?"

Hermione knew the answer, but she was too amused by Theo and looked at him expectantly with Cho.

"Six years ago," he said with a slight blush before stuffing one last handful of cheese in his mouth and hurrying away.

The whole time they cooked, Draco kept a close eye on Hermione from the other side of the room, trying to make sure she was all right. She kept giving him a reassuring smile to let him know she was doing just fine, but, even so, it was clear that Cho's attempted girl talk with her was making her a bit uncomfortable.

Once the turkey was in the oven, Teddy wanted to show Hermione and Draco the play area downstairs that Santa Claus had brought for him. Draco had to admit, it was pretty noble of Cho and Oliver to give credit to a fictitious Muggle man after all of the hard work they put in.

Teddy ended up dragging Theo downstairs too, and they all played in the small, fort-like play area for a while before deciding it was time to head back upstairs.

"Draco, wait," said Hermione, grabbing his hand just as he began to ascend the staircase. "Would you mind if we stayed down here a minute longer?"

"Sure," he said, looking up at Theo and Teddy.

"I'll take the kid up," said Theo, letting Teddy guide him back to the main room.

"Everything all right?" asked Draco as soon as they were gone.

"Yes," said Hermione with a nod. "It's all just … a bit overwhelming, I suppose. I only need a moment." She pulled him close. "Just me and you."

Draco smiled. He stroked her cheek while staring into her amber eyes, only then remembering the ring he still had hidden away for her. It would be a nice surprise when they returned home later.

Putting a hand on his arm, Hermione leaned up and gave Draco a kiss, her heart still aflutter from what he had said to her earlier. That he loved her.

Upstairs, Dennis was pacing around the room, his eyes constantly drifting over to the staircase. "What's taking them so long?" he asked, whipping his head towards Theo, who was looking through a picture book Teddy had really wanted him to read.

Theo shrugged. "Dunno. Why do you care?"

"I just …" Dennis bit his lip and thought carefully about his words. "I just don't like Hermione being alone with a Death Eater, all right?"

Theo's eyes glanced up from the book and stared hard at Dennis. Then he smirked. "So how uneasy would you feel if I went down there too?"

Dennis went red in the face.

Theo laughed. "You *do* realize that the two of them are alone all the bloody time, right? I mean, she's only been living in his flat for three months." He smiled wider. "And now I live there too."

Bronson chuckled from the kitchen, while Quigley looked just as amused from where he was playing Wizard's Chess with Oliver.

Dennis's face quickly went from red to white. "That's where she's staying? With … with *him*?"

"And me," Theo said brightly.

Without another word, Dennis was darting for the staircase and heading down it.

Theo followed him with his eyes. Once he was out of view, he looked at Bronson, smiled and said, "That kid is in for a serious reality check."

Not even thirty seconds later, Dennis was running back up the stairs, looking horribly panicked and out of breath. Either he was in really bad shape, or something had excited him.

"They're … they're …" He gulped. "They're bloody snogging down there! *Snogging*!"

"Yeah, they do that a lot," said Theo, looking back at his book. "Try living with them."

"Yes!" Cho, who was still helping in the kitchen, suddenly threw her hands up in victory. "I totally called it! Pay up, Oliver!"

"Oh, bloody hell," said Oliver. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a Galleon and tossed it to her.

Dennis looked at Cho, who was smiling brightly at her new Galleon. "You *knew*?"

"I suspected," she said. "Dromeda did too!"

He moved his ever-growing eyes to Andromeda, who was seated next to Theo on the sofa with Teddy in her lap. She shrugged. "I have known Draco for long enough now to know when there is a new presence affecting his life. And he was just so concerned for her parents when they were in trouble."

"Wait … *that's* why he was here that night?" asked Dennis.

Cho scoffed. "*Really*, Dennis? You didn't put two and two together that night? We all heard Ron and Ginny's announcement on the radio."

"Even I caught onto that one, mate," said Oliver, once again focusing on his chess game.

Just then, they all heard a creak and turned their heads to see Draco and Hermione stepping off of the staircase. They both looked around curiously.

"What's with the tension?" asked Draco, his eyes immediately falling on Dennis,

who looked like he was seriously contemplating slaughtering him.

"The little Gryffindork caught sight of the two of you downstairs," said Theo, finally closing the picture book and smiling at his friend. "I don't think he liked what he saw very much." He sucked air in through his teeth.

Still looking at Dennis, Draco raised his eyebrows. "Really now? And just what didn't you like about it?"

"You bloody prick," said Dennis through gritted teeth. "How dare you … how *dare* you snog Hermione!"

Hermione's cheeks flushed bright crimson as she began to stair intently at the floor.

Theo chuckled. "She's done more than snog him, mate. Perhaps you would like to hear the story of why we were late?"

Dennis's fists clenched. He let out a hoarse growl as he lunged forward, pulling his wand out and heading straight for Draco.

Before he could cast a hex, Hermione was leaping in front of Draco and holding her hands out stop him. "Dennis, don't!" she shouted. "You have no right to be acting this way!"

"Move out of the way, Hermione," said Dennis in a strained voice. "He's had this for a long time coming."

"Why?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips.

"Because he's a bloody Death Eater!"

Hermione shrugged. "So? It's just a title, Dennis. Obviously, he's defected or he wouldn't be here."

"You don't know tha -"

"Yes. I. Do," she said firmly. "It is because of Draco that I am standing here now. That you're *all* standing here now. Every last one of you would have been captured if he hadn't warned you about the curfew."

"*And* told us that it would be safe for us to stay in this place," Andromeda added. She had jumped off of the sofa the moment Dennis started going for Draco and was slowly edging towards him.

"How?" he asked, looking over Hermione's shoulder at Draco. "*How* did you know this place was safe? I've always wondered, but Dromeda would never let me ask. I've just been waiting for the day Death Eaters seep out of the bloody walls."

Draco gazed back at him and smirked. He put a hand on the small of Hermione's back and moved so he was beside her instead of behind her. She tried to protest, but he was adamant. He would not let her protect him like this.

"Four years ago, when I was still trying to earn back the Dark Lord's trust, he had me working at the Ministry, snooping through old files, trying to find any information on members of the resistance that might help us capture them. Really tedious work." He cringed at the memory. Merlin, he hated that bloody task. But he supposed it was better than what he was doing now. Killing people. "While researching the Weasleys, I came across the deed to this place, and I simply remember seeing that it was a registered residence as well as a business. I didn't feel it was important enough to correct, so I ignored it."

"So … that's it?" asked Dennis unbelievingly.

Draco shrugged. "Not exactly the malicious story you were hoping for, I know, but that really is it. It was just a bloody coincidence."

Dennis did not look happy, but he seemed satisfied enough with the answer. "And … and you two?" he said, pointing his wand between Draco and Hermione. As he did this, Draco put his hand out protectively in front of her. "What are you?"

Draco and Hermione looked at each other. "What? Like, a definition?" Draco asked.

"Yes."

Still staring at each other, they both began to purse their eyebrows. Huh. They had never really talked about it before. Theo, Bronson and Quigley often referred to Hermione as Draco's girlfriend but, while he never bothered to correct them, he had never called her that himself.

"Draco and I are … well, I suppose we're *involved*," Hermione said, her voice sounding shaky.

"Involved?" Dennis repeated. "What the bloody hell does that mean?"

"Why must we label it?" Draco asked. "It means what it means. You name it, we've done it."

Hermione blushed beside him, but she did not scrutinize him. She really was not herself today. It was as if all of the hard work she had been putting in to get herself back to normal meant nothing when other people were around. She simply was not used to this sort of human interaction anymore.

Dennis sneered. "You bloody fucking -"

"Cho, will you please take Teddy into the back room?" said Andromeda, looking at the girl pleadingly.

Cho nodded and headed over to collect him from the sofa.

"How dare you!" Dennis shot a hex at Draco, but it was not very strong. He simply had to raise his hand to deflect it, but Hermione still gasped.

Theo was on his feet in a second, his wand aimed intently at Dennis.

"No wands!" Andromeda shouted as Cho took Teddy into her arms.

Theo slipped his away, but when Dennis began shooting hex after hex at Draco, who was trying to block them without being knocked down the staircase, he immediately reacted by lunging forward, grabbing Dennis and flipping him over his shoulder so he landed hard on his back.

"Wow," said Bronson from the kitchen, leaning on the counter and watching Theo with lust-filled eyes. "That was hot." He caught Cho's gaze just before she ducked into the room with Teddy and she nodded in agreement. They both chuckled.

"Get off of me!" Dennis screamed as Theo pinned his arms above his head.

"Not until you take a breath, you fucking prick," said Theo venomously.

"Theo, where they fuck did you learn to do that?" asked Draco, staring at him curiously.

"I taught myself," he said. "You never know when you're going to find yourself wandless, and, if you do, you might want to know more than how to throw a punch."

Draco smirked. "Noted."

"How could you do it, Hermione?" shouted Dennis, still struggling beneath Theo even though his efforts were futile. "How could you do this to Ron?"

Staring down at him, Hermione's jaw dropped slightly.

"*He's waited for you*!" Dennis's face was bright red as he took several sharp breaths.

Draco expected Hermione to turn away from him, like she always did when put in an uncomfortable situation, but she did not. Instead, she kept his gaze, stepping forward and crouching down beside him.

Hermione sighed. "I haven't seen Ron in four and a half years, Dennis. We're not the same people anymore. It's impossible for anyone to fight on either side of this war and come out unchanged."

"But *he's* a Death Eater," he spat, motioning his head towards Draco. "They're murderers!"

"Oh, and I suppose members of the resistance are so innocent?" hissed Theo, tightening his grip on him.

"We only kill who we have to!"

Theo let out a loud, "Ha!" Then he said, "Two years ago, a member of the resistance, I can name him if you want?"

Dennis said nothing.

Theo smiled. "Seamus Finnegan. I know you know him. He was a member of that fucking club of all of yours in school. Anyway, during a battle I was participating in just outside of Hogsmeade, he killed a Death Eater by the name of Helena Mackenny."

Draco blinked. He remembered Helena. Sweet girl. Never should have been one of them. Much like Astoria. He recalled Theo being greatly troubled by her death but never thought much about it. At one time, he had suspected that maybe they were dating, but Theo always denied it. It was after her death that slags became a daily habit of his.

"Helena hated being a Death Eater," Theo continued. "*Hated* it, but her parents forced her. In the two years she had been one, she had never once killed someone, other than the people the Dark Lord has us torture for information. But they hardly count. They're already dead, and they know it." Continuing to pin Dennis's wrists with one hand, Theo moves his other hand down and gives his face a tap before grabbing his chin. "So tell me something, Creevey. Was what

Finnegan did justified? *Or* was it murder?"

Dennis spat at him. "She was a Death Eater. She deserved it!"

Unable to control his anger any longer, Theo lifted his hand and swung it hard against Dennis's face.

"Theo, that's enough," said Hermione, grabbing Dennis's wand from where it fell on the ground and handing it to Andromeda. "Let him go."

"Not until he admits that there are fucking shades of gray! Neither side is bloody good! We're both mentally fucked in the head! That's war!"

Hermione looked down at Dennis, but he showed no signs of budging on this. She sighed and said, "Please, Theo."

Theo looked into her pleading eyes and huffed. "Only because this is your fucking holiday." He let go of Dennis and stood up. "Don't ruin this for her," he said, giving him a kick before heading back towards the sofa and sinking onto it.

"Best Christmas *ever*," Oliver whispered to Kennil. Both had moved incredibly close to the action and were watching with a fixed fascination.

"Reminds me a lot of my house," said Bronson. "Right, Quigs?" He looked back at his friend, who was still sitting in his chair beside the chess board.

"Unfortunately, yes," said Quigley, finally standing up. "Which is why I always dragged you over to *my* house."

Hermione held her hand out to help Dennis up but he rejected it. "What's happened to you?" he asked. "You never would have associated with the likes of *them* before."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Stop talking about them like that, Dennis. Draco and Theo have both done a lot for me."

"Yes, I'm sure *he* has," he said with disdain as he motioned his head towards Draco. "Fucking twisted your mind so you actually believe you have feelings for him."

"What was that?" Draco asked, his fists clenching as he stepped forward.

"You heard me," said Dennis. "A girl like Hermione would *never* go for a sociopath like you if her mind hadn't been seriously fucked with."

Hermione's jaw dropped, her eyes filling with tears as that feeling of insanity suddenly washed over her again.

"You fucking little -"

"Stop right there," said Bronson, running forward and stepping between them. "Malfoy, take Hermione downstairs."

"Just as soon as I deal with this piece of -"

"No, now," said Bronson, glancing at Hermione.

Draco looked over to see that she had officially burst into tears. He quickly grabbed her hand and pulled her away, putting his arm around her and leading her carefully down the stairs.

As soon as they were gone, Bronson turned to Dennis and crossed his arms. "Listen to me, you little shit. Believe it or not, Hermione was actually excited to come here. Today is important to her and I won't have *you* ruining it."

"Piss off!"

Bronson pursed his eyebrows. "Do you seriously not know what she's been through? Do you not care?"

Dennis went white and quickly cast his eyes to the floor.

"Well, let me spell it out for you. She was raped. She was tortured. She had to slit a man's fucking throat open just to escape and not a day goes by that I don't see her eyes glaze over as she gets sucked back into those memories. Yet, somehow, in this fucking twisted world, she's managed to find a bit of happiness. With *him*. And you will *not* take that away from her. Not on fucking Christmas."

"But … it's fucking Malfoy," said Dennis, finally looking up at him. "I have a hard time believing that, after all of this time, he suddenly feels remorse."

"What do you mean 'after all of this time'?" asked Bronson. "He has *always* felt remorse."

"I doubt -"

"Quigley and I are Muggle-borns," Bronson suddenly shared freely, glancing slightly at Theo who was staring at him curiously. He had neglected to mention that to him.

"You are?" asked Dennis.

Bronson nodded. "We met Malfoy just under three years ago. He recognized our forged identification papers in a second and, to our surprise, instead of turning us in, he helped us. Got us some legit looking papers, gave us a flat in his building. And he's continued to help us. For almost *three* years."

"I … I don't understand," said Dennis. "If you're Muggle-borns then why are you here? Why are you living in the city?"

Bronson looked at Quigley, who frowned and said, "My sister. She's a Muggle who didn't get out in time before You-Know-Who took over. We came to find her."

"And did you?" Theo asked suddenly. He had never heard any of this before.

Quigley quickly turned away.

"We did," said Bronson. "She was hiding in the Underground, but … well, we lost her about a year ago. The group she was staying with down there was discovered. Some escaped but most were killed or captured. We still don't know her fate."

"And does Malfoy know this?" asked Dennis.

"Of course," said Bronson. "He's tried to help us find her, but he doesn't know what she looks like and we have no photo. We've described her to him but, apparently, a million slaves fit her description."

"She was pretty," said Quigley weakly from across the room. "If she was captured, she probably would have to endure the same shit Hermione went through." He paused. "I almost hope she is dead."

Bronson took a deep breath. "Look, the point is, perhaps you should ease up on Malfoy a bit. He's done a lot of bad. He *still* does a lot of bad, but he's also desperately looking for redemption. And he cares a great deal for Hermione."

"He loves her."

They all turned to look at Theo.

He smiled and shrugged. "Why do you all look so surprised? Death Eaters *are* capable of love, you know?"

"Dennis, perhaps you should go down and apologize," said Andromeda, stepping

forward and putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't want to," he said under his breath.

"Come on, mate," said Oliver. "It's a bloody holiday and we all want to have a good time. This is the closest any of us have gotten to an actual Christmas since the war began."

A pause.

"If you don't apologize, they'll probably leave and take the food with them," said Oliver, looking down at his stomach. "And I *really* want to taste that turkey."

Bronson smirked. "I suppose I should get back to the kitchen then."

"I'll get Cho and make her put on one of her Christmas records." Oliver smiled as he ran towards the back room.

"Go, Dennis," said Andromeda, giving him a small shove.

He groaned and headed down the stairs.

On the bottom floor, Draco was leaning against the counter in the main part of the shop while Hermione sat between his legs and pressed her back against his chest. He had his arms wrapped around her waist and her hands rested on top of his.

"You all right?" he asked, giving her a kiss on her temple.

Hermione smiled softly. "Yes," she said. "I was already aware that reactions like this were unavoidable when it comes to you and me."

Draco burrowed his head into her soft hair. "You stood up for me up there."

"Of course I did," she said. "You have been wonderful to me, Draco. Don't let someone like Dennis make you doubt yourself."

Draco smiled and kissed her temple again. "So we're 'involved', are we?"

Hermione turned her head slightly so she could look at him. "What would *you* call it?"

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose I never really thought to define it."

"Well, maybe it's time we did."

Draco put his head on her shoulder as he began to seriously think about it. Then it hit him. His head shot up as his stared widely into the distance. "Holy fuck. I'm in a relationship."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Are you?" she asked.

He nodded. "It seems that I am."

Hermione smirked and kissed his cheek. "Well, I might be flattered if you didn't sound so scornful about it."

"Not scornful," he said. "Just surprised." He smiled and kissed her lips.

"One might think you would have figured that out before you told me you loved me," she said before kissing him again.

Just as the two began to melt into each other, someone cleared their throat. They both turned to see Dennis staring in the opposite direction of them.

"Something we can help you with, Creevey?" asked Draco.

Dennis shrugged, still keeping his eyes focused elsewhere. "No. Just … sorry," he said with a sigh.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "And just which one of us are you apologizing to?"

"Both," said Dennis, finally glancing in their direction. "I don't think I'll ever like you, Malfoy, but I get the whole 'gray' thing Nott was talking about. And … you have helped us. A lot."

"I don't need the apology," said Draco, glancing his eyes towards Hermione.

"I saw that," she said, even though her back was to him.

"I was getting to that," said Dennis. He took a deep breath. "Hermione, I …" His eyes began to flood. "I'm really glad you're here, all right? And … and I'm sorry we weren't able to get you out sooner." The tears were suddenly falling from his eyes in heavy pools. "I've gone on several of the rescue missions Harry and Ron planned for you. We tried. We really did and -"

"Dennis, I know," said Hermione, using Draco's knees to help push her to her feet. She walked over to him and put a comforting hand on the crying boy's shoulder. "You all did your best, but the point of the slave trade was so that none of us were ever in one place for too long, especially me. If there were rumors about the

resistance looking for me then they were not against moving me early. They made it impossible."

Dennis nodded and used the back of his hand to wipe away his tears. "I'm just really glad you're safe. And …" He gulped. "And happy."

Hermione smiled. "I am."

Once that was all settled, the three of them headed back upstairs. Now that everything was out in the open, Hermione stayed relatively close to Draco for the remainder of the evening. Even though it all had been sorted out, he could still tell that she was not entirely comfortable here. Except around Teddy. It was obvious that she adored the child.

After dinner, Hermione gave them all the small presents she had picked out for them. Draco had found out about her little trip to the Black Market within an hour of getting home that night. She had never been very good at keeping secrets. He had given Theo a good punch after. But, of course, Hermione knew exactly what to do to calm him down and used that to her advantage. Men were so easy.

Just before they were about to leave, Andromeda took Hermione by the hand and led her into the back room. "I have a gift for you," she said, reaching under the bed and pulling something out. Hermione was surprised when she saw it was a Muggle telephone.

"Is that how you have been communicating with the resistance?" she asked.

Andromeda smiled. "Yes. We use them all over. Death Eaters really have no idea, since most are purebloods." She began dialing.

Hermione quickly reached out and put a hand on top of hers. "Not Harry and Ron!" she said with wide eyes. "Draco would *never* appro -"

"No, Hermione," said Andromeda, giving her hand a squeeze as she took it off of her. "It's not them. Draco already knows about this. In fact, it was his idea."

Hermione began to fidget nervously as Andromeda continued to dial.

"Hippogriff," she said as soon as someone answered. "Yes … Yes, we realize it can only be for a moment … Uhuh … Is she ready, then?" Andromeda looked up at Hermione and handed her the receiver. "It's for you," she said with a smile.

Hermione reluctantly took the phone and brought it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hermione?" the person on the other end of the phone said before bursting into tears. "Oh my god, Hermione, is that really you?"

Hermione's heart began to ache. "Mom?" Her eyes immediately flooded.

"Hermione! My darling, my darling! I can't believe it! Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Out of practice, Hermione began to shake her head. Then she realized. "No, no, I'm fine. How … how are you?" She gulped as her thoughts suddenly drifted to her father.

"As good as to be expected," said her mother, still crying madly. "I miss you. And I plan on giving you a stern talking to about altering my memories!"

Hermione chuckled. "I knew you would. But I just … I wanted to protect you." It was getting harder and harder to hide her sobs from the woman on the other end.

"I know, sweetie. I would have done the same for you. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Emily, it's time to go," said another voice on the other end.

"No," said Hermione's mother. "No, not yet. Please, just give me a moment longer."

The person sighed. "One minute."

"Where are you going?" Hermione cried.

"I'm not allowed to tell you," her mother answered. "The Death Eaters are still searching for us so we have to move every couple of days. They have those dreadful Demented things trailing us."

"Dementors, Mom," Hermione corrected.

"Yes, well, they're still *dreadful*."

Hermione chuckled.

"I don't have much time but … Hermione, please promise me you'll be careful. I want us to be together again at the end of all of this."

"We will," Hermione said with a sob. "We'll win this, Mom. I promise."

"Emily …"

"All right, all right!" her mother shouted at the person. "Hermione, I have to go. Please, never forget that I love you."

"I won't," she cried.

"And I'm always with you. So is your father. Understand?"

"I do. And I'm always with you too."

"I know you are, sweetie."

"Emily!"

"Fine! I'm coming! Hermione …"

"I know. I love you, Mom. I love you!"

"I love you! And have a happy Christmas!"

And then the receiver clicked. There was nothing left but a dial tone. Andromeda reached out and took the phone from Hermione's hand as she continued to cry.

Without another thought, Hermione turned and ran out of the room. The second she did, Draco stood up from where he was sitting on the sofa and hurried over to her. She met him halfway and threw her arms around his waist.

"Thank you," she whispered while crying into his chest. "Thank you."

Draco smiled as he stroked her hair. "Don't mention it."

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"Hermione, what's taking so long?" asked Draco as she fidgeted around in the washroom. "Considering you said you had to give me my present at nighttime, I already have a pretty good idea about what it is." He smirked to himself proudly.

Just then, Hermione walked out wearing nothing but a sexy green negligee. She leaned against the doorframe.

"Fuck …" he said as his eyes slowly trailed up her, taking her all in. And then he noticed what she had in her hand. "Is that a cupcake?"

Hermione grinned. She dipped her finger into the chocolate frosting and licked it

off.

Draco laughed. "Hermione, stop acting like you're bloody fucking nice or something. It's *creeping* me out."

"What? Me being nice is creeping you out?" said Hermione, seductively walking over. She crawled onto the bed, slowly moving towards him until she was close enough to rub some frosting on his neck. She licked it off.

Draco shuddered. "Fuck, you're good at this."

"I learned from the best," she said, putting some frosting on her finger and holding it out to him.

As he was sucking on her digit, he finally noticed that she had mistletoe pinned in her hair. *Damn.* That was hot. "Is this homemade?" he asked, taking the cupcake from her and examining it carefully.

"It is," she said. "You can shove it into your mouth if you want to. I have extras."

Draco smirked. He peeled off the wrapper and stuffed the whole thing into his mouth. Hermione laughed and pressed her palms against his chipmunk cheeks.

While he chewed, she used her wand to summon another cupcake from the washroom.

By the end of the night, the entire bed was covered with cake and frosting, but Draco and Hermione were, more or less, licked clean.

The mistletoe and fallen out of her hair at one point, and Draco was currently holding it above their heads, forcing her to lean her head up from his chest and kiss him. Well, maybe not *forcing.* At this point, it was safe to say that Hermione was more than willing.

While keeping their kiss going strong, Hermione slowly began to reach up and tore the mistletoe out of Draco's hands.

"Hey!" he shouted while pulling away. "What did you do that for?"

Hermione shrugged and put the mistletoe on the nightstand. Resting her chin on her hands, she smiled and gazed up at him.

Draco reached down and stroked her cheek. While staring into her amber eyes, he suddenly remembered. "Oh! I have something for you."

Hermione pursed her eyebrows. "Another gift?" she asked.

"Sort of," he said, carefully moving her off of him and getting off of the bed. He walked over to his satchel and dug through it until he located what he was looking for. "I found it in Godric's Hollow." He looked at it before slowly walking back to her. "Well, a ghost led me to it."

"A ghost?" repeated Hermione.

He nodded. "I guess she wanted me to have it." He held the ring out.

Hermione looked at it and blinked several times before taking it from him. "It's beautiful," she said.

"It's the same color as your eyes."

Hermione looked up at him and smiled. "Really?" she said. "Exactly the same?" She held it up so he could compare.

Yes. There was no doubt about it. "Exactly the same," he said, before leaning down and kissing her.

Just then, his stomach grumbled. Draco looked down at it and frowned. He supposed they had burned off all of the calories from the cupcakes. "Hot chocolate?" he said while glancing at her.

Hermione smiled. "Sounds wonderful."

Draco gave her one more kiss before leaving the room. He was a little surprised to see that the balcony door was open. Bronson and Theo were smoking and chatting out there. It was a bit odd, considering it was well after midnight and Bronson would be unable to go back to his own flat. Then Bronson leaned in and kissed him.

Draco's eyes widened. *Shit.* He turned away and hurried back into his bedroom. When he got there, Hermione was staring at the ring in her hand and frowning. She looked up as he entered.

"No hot chocolate?" she asked.

Draco shook his head. "Definitely not," he said. There was no way he was going back out there.

"It's fine," she said, holding out her arms so that he could come into them.

Draco did just that. Then he touched the ring in her hand and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Hermione answered too quickly.

"You're lying."

She sighed. "It's just …" She took the ring and slipped it on. "This is the only finger it fits on." She held up her hand to see that it was on her left ring finger.

Draco gulped. "Oh. It … it doesn't fit on the other hand?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. That is my dominant hand so it's a bit larger. The ring won't even go past my knuckle."

"But … it fits perfectly here," he said, reaching out and fiddling with it. He was right. Perfect fit.

She frowned and took it off.

"Hermione, I … I don't want to marry anyone."

"I know," she said. "I'm not asking you to -"

"I know," he interrupted. "But it's just … this bloody war. I don't think marriage is fair to people."

Hermione turned and looked at him with hopeful eyes. "So … you're not against it completely?"

Draco shook his head. "Of course I believe in marriage. Not arranged marriage, but ones out of love I am not against."

Hermione drew her eyes back to the ring.

Draco pulled her body into his and turned her head so she was forced to look at him. "Hermione, if I …" He gulped. "If I ever married anyone, I would want it to be you."

Hermione's breath hitched. "Really?" she asked.

He smiled and kissed her. "Obviously. I told you I loved you earlier and I meant it. You're 'it'. I know you are."

Her eyes began to tear.

Reaching behind her, Draco opened the drawer on his nightstand and pulled something out. It was a necklace. A locket, to be precise.

"This was my mother's," he said, undoing the clasp. "She had two necklaces that she wore regularly. This one and one with a flower pendant that my father has."

Hermione immediately knew that necklace. It was what Lucius had been looking for when he almost caught her in his room.

Draco took the locket off of the chain. Then he took the ring from Hermione's hand and slipped it on. He clasped it around her neck.

"You're … you're giving me your mother's chain?" she asked, her eyes wide in disbelief.

Draco smirked. "It's just a chain, Hermione. The locket is my memory. This is yours now."

She looked down at the ring around her neck and began twirling it between her fingers.

"Consider that a promise," he said.

Hermione looked back at him. "A promise?"

Draco nodded. "That if this war ever ends, and we both make it out alive, then I'm putting that ring on your finger. And then everyone will know that you are mine."

Hermione reached up and stroked her thumb across his cheek. She wished everyone could know now. That she was Draco's and he was hers. But it was impossible.

Her heart became heavy as the realization that this day he spoke of might never come hit her. There was still a chance that one of them, maybe neither of them, would survive this. Or that Voldemort would win. If that ever happened, she could not die, could not lose Draco forever without telling him how she felt.

"I love you," she suddenly said to even her own surprise.

Draco's mouth fell open, his silver eyes practically dancing as he gazed back at her. "You're not just saying that because I said it?"

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "No. It's just how I feel. I love you, Draco."

Not wanting her to see his eyes tear, Draco put a hand behind Hermione's head and pulled her in for a passionate kiss. "I love you too, Hermione," he said between parts of their lips.

They both chuckled softly as they fell back onto the bed, once again getting lost in each other for hours that just never seemed long enough.

But Draco and Hermione were no fools. They knew from the beginning that this could never end well. And now that love was involved … well, that just made things all the more complicated.

# Chapter 21: Act Naturally

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"Ah!" Bronson screamed as Theo grabbed him by the arm and flipped him onto the ground. Even though Theo was a good three inches shorter than him and quite a bit leaner, he still did this with ease.

Theo looked down at him and flashed that cute grin of his. "Hey, you two were right," he said, turning his head to look at Draco and Hermione. "It *is* fun to use him as a test dummy."

Draco made a weird grunting noise and looked elsewhere.

Theo's face scrunched in curiosity. "What's wrong with you?"

"Can you show me now?" asked Hermione, stepping forward and holding out a hand to help Bronson off of the ground. It was obvious she was trying to change the subject. Draco had already told her about what he saw the night before when they woke up that morning. Well … afternoon. They had been up pretty late.

Draco was not exactly upset by the sight of Bronson and Theo kissing, but he was just a bit confused. Theo had always really liked women. And he meant *really* liked

them. A lot.

Hermione tried to justify that maybe Theo was not gay - Bronson still insisted that he wasn't - and maybe he was just attracted to the person. Bronson was great, even Draco could not say anything bad about him.

Of course, Hermione had to insist that Draco keep his mouth shut about this. If Theo wanted him to know then he would tell him. And considering how confused Draco felt about the whole situation, it was irrefutable that Theo was feeling that same confusion hundredfold.

At least Draco found slight relief when they left their room and found Bronson sleeping on the sofa. His excuse was that he and Theo had gotten caught up talking about the whole Muggle-born thing he had apparently confessed to calm Dennis down. And he wanted to know more about Quigley's sister to see if he could help. It probably was not a lie, he just happened to leave out the part where they snogged.

When Theo put his hands on Hermione to show her the movements she needed to take, Draco suddenly became very alert. Feeling Bronson looking at him, he turned and the other wizard rolled his eyes. He had always felt that Draco's jealousy was ridiculous, Hermione was clearly smitten, but it was something he was unable to control.

"Bronson, can I try now?" asked Hermione.

"Why can't you try on Malfoy?"

Hermione looked at Draco and smiled.

"Fuck no," he said.

"Why not?" she pouted.

"Other than the obvious?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Hermione nodded.

"Bronson's bigger than me," he said. "If you can't flip him then I'll let you try on me."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Really?"

Draco smirked. "Well … only if we're naked."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It looks like it's me and you, Bronson." She used her wand to soften the floor in the area she planned to flip him onto and got into position. "Ready?" she asked.

Bronson grunted before mumbling, "Whatever."

Hermione attempted the moves that Theo had shown her. While she was able to get Bronson off of the ground, she ended up getting him into more of a half-flip, where he was rolling around strangely on her back as she wobbled around. When he finally fell, she fell with him, missing the spot she had softened with her wand by a good two feet.

Draco and Theo were laughing hysterically from the sidelines throughout the whole ordeal. Hermione looked up at them from the ground and grimaced.

"It's not funny!"

"It was pretty fucking funny," said Theo.

While getting to her feet, Hermione said, "Draco, I am going to need to try on you."

"Fuck. No."

"But I need to try with someone smaller first just to get the feel for it, and Theo is instructing me."

"Did I not just say 'fuck no'?"

"Draco, stop being difficult!" she said while crossing her arms and blowing a strand of loose hair out of her face.

"I already told you I would be more than willing if -"

"We're not getting naked!" she shouted. "Now, get in position."

"Hey guys, what's going on?" asked Quigley, who was walking down the stairs.

Draco turned and gave him a onceover. He was about the same height as Draco, maybe an inch taller, but fairly thin. Probably around the same weight.

Draco smirked. "Ah, Quigley. Perfect timing."

<center>XXX</center>

Draco leaned back in his chair at the Dark Lord's table with his arms crossed. He

did not like the way Quincy Nott kept staring at his son from across the table. With his peripherals, he could see Theo leaning forward and staring intently at his fidgeting hands on the table. He was definitely not blind to his father.

Feeling Draco's eyes on him, Quincy moved his head slightly to the left and narrowed his eyes. Draco just smiled.

"My lord, that is all we have on the agenda for this evening," said Bellatrix as she looked up from her piece of parchment and glanced at Lord Voldemort.

"Very well," he said. "Is there anything else anyone would like to add?"

"My lord," said Mathis Flint, raising his hand. Voldemort nodded. "I was just wondering why no further attempts have been made to look for my son. It's been three months now and -"

"Your son is hardly worth our time," Voldemort said coldly.

Mathis's face flushed. "But, my lord -"

"You have always been of assistance to me, Mathis, but Marcus holds little value here. He was a dreadful imbecile -"

Draco's mouth twitched upward. He had that right.

"- and I have been informed on more than one occasion that he was nothing but a burden on missions. Perhaps we should all see his disappearance as a blessing."

"Here, here!" shouted Draco.

Theo glanced at him and rolled his eyes. Damn. That Hermione habit was spreading rapidly.

"A perfect example," said Voldemort, motioning a hand towards Draco. "While some of my oldest followers' children prevail by my side, proving their worth to be far greater than their predecessors -"

Lucius's face remained firm but his head sunk slightly.

"- others simply do not live up to expectations." His snake-like eyes drifted down the table to Astoria, whose fear was far more evident than Lucius's as she cowered in her seat. She had recently been called upon to do a bit of torturing for Voldemort. It had not gone well.

"She is young, my lord," Draco said suddenly. After the promise he had made to her, he could not help but feel the need to be somewhat protective, especially when she was being called out in front of everyone like this. "Give her time."

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to take *young* Astoria on a real mission once the New Year is upon us," said Lord Voldemort, moving his snake eyes over to Draco.

"Of course, my lord." He looked at Astoria and smirked. "I would be happy to break her in."

Astoria gave him a small smile. She, of course, knew his implications were a joke, but her father did not, which became very clear when he stood up from his seat and shouted, "You most certainly *will not*!"

Draco smiled innocently. "But the Dark Lord said -"

"No! You will not be ruining my daughter before she finds a *proper* wizard to marry! Do you hear me, Malfoy?" Arron was turning redder with every word he spoke.

"Father, he was joking," said Astoria, looking embarrassed. "Surely Draco has been at this table long enough for you to realize when he is trying to get a rise out of people."

"And it seems I have succeeded yet again," said Draco. "My lord, are we finished?" He turned back towards Voldemort.

Mathis raised his hand again. "But what about my -?"

"Yes, we are finished," said Voldemort. "Arron, I will need you to stay behind. I do not care for outbursts at my table, and you will be punished appropriately."

Arron went white as he slowly sunk back into his chair.

"Everyone else is dismissed."

Draco stood up and headed for the exit with Theo at his heels.

"Theo, wait!"

Theo groaned. Draco glanced over his shoulder to see Quincy running after them. He stopped walking, forcing Theo to do the same.

"What are you doing?" Theo muttered under his breath.

"Curiosity," said Draco with a shrug.

"Malfoy, if you would not mind, I would like to speak to my son alone," said Quincy, looking at Draco with disdain.

"I do mind, actually," said Draco.

Theo groaned again and turned around. "What do you want, Father?"

"A chance to explain," said Quincy, almost sounding desperate.

Draco huffed. "Your son is no fool, Nott. Even without the so-called empty threat you made to Rabastan, you still tried to have him exposed as a traitor."

"I was not trying to expose him!" shouted Quincy. "I know Theo would never betray the Dark Lord. But *you*. You I don't trust, Malfoy. And the way the two of you carry on together, I simply thought he might know something to expose *you*."

Draco pursed his eyebrows. "If he knew something to expose me, then he would undoubtedly be a traitor himself, wouldn't he?"

"Not if he was unaware of it!" shouted Quincy. "You cannot be trusted, Malfoy. I know you can't, and I'm going to prove it." He moved his eyes back to Theo. "And when I do, Theo, you *will* be coming home."

Theo looked firmly into his father's eyes and said in a voice as cold as ice, "I won't."

He turned and headed for the fireplace, this time with Draco on *his* heels.

When they got there, Gregory Goyle was standing beside it. Everyone else had already gone. "Where are you two headed?" he asked.

"Nowhere," said Theo, his mind clearly still distracted by his father.

"Wanna go to the pub? Feels like it's been ages."

"I'm busy," said Draco, who really did have a previous engagement with Hermione.

"I'll go," said Theo. It was obvious that he needed a drink.

"Would you mind if I came along?"

They all turned to see Astoria walking towards them.

"What are you still doing here?" Draco asked.

"The Dark Lord wanted me to stay behind and cast a few curses on my father." She smiled. "It was surprisingly easier than I expected."

"S'alright with me," said Goyle, looking at Theo.

He shrugged. "Whatever. Just don't get in my way when I get piss ass drunk."

"As long as you don't get in mine," she said.

Draco let all of them Floo to the Leaky Cauldron before heading home.

"Hermione!" he called as soon as he got there.

The door to his bedroom opened and she walked out, smiling as the small black dress she was wearing fluttered as she walked. Bronson had gone out to purchase one for her that afternoon, and it definitely did not disappoint. Her hair was flowing in tamed ringlets and there were subtle signs of blush and mascara on her face, but nothing too extravagant. She wore simple black flats, since they had all agreed that heels were not a good idea for her. She was not good enough on her feet as it was. But, of course, the best detail about her was the chain she wore around her neck with the amber ring hanging from it.

"Wow," said Draco, wrapping his arms around her as she reached him and giving her a kiss. "You look beautiful."

"So do you," she said, giving him a smile before kissing him again.

"Let me just change and then we can go," said Draco, but he made no attempt to move. Her lips tasted extremely divine right now.

Eventually, she pulled away and pushed him towards the bedroom, giving his arse a little tap to hurry him along.

"Don't tease me," said Draco with a wink.

When he got to their room, he immediately began looking through his drawers for his gray jumper that he knew was Hermione's favorite. But it was not there.

"Hermione, do you know where my jumper is?" he asked, poking his head back into the front room.

"Which one?" she inquired.

"The gray one."

"Oh," she said. "No, I haven't seen it." An obvious lie, but one that he would worry about later.

Instead, Draco ended up grabbing a dark-blue one and pulling it on. After changing into a clean pair of trousers, he headed back out to the front room. They both put on their cloaks and headed for the fireplace, Draco Flooing first to Bronson and Quigley's restaurant.

He stepped out into the kitchen and moved aside for Hermione to come through after him. She kept her head well-hidden in her hood as she grabbed onto his hand.

"Ah, there you are!" shouted Bronson, hurrying across the room to them. "Quigs!"

Quigley appeared pretty much out of nowhere and said, "This way."

Draco and Hermione followed him out of the kitchen and through a door. After leading them down a short hallway, he opened another door and let them head in first. It was a private dining room, lit up with enchanted candles while soft music played. The small table set for two with silver plates and goblets was covered with a lacy white tablecloth. Hermione smiled as the candlelight hit the dark walls, making small silver specks twinkle on them like stars.

"Beautiful," she said as Draco removed her cloak for her. He then removed his and handed them both off to Quigley.

"Hubba, hubba, Hermione," said Quigley, finally getting a good look at her in that dress. "You sure you want to keep wasting your time with this git? Because I am totally and completely available and -"

"Enough, Quigley," said Draco, shoving him towards the door. "I'm not paying the ridiculous price for this room to have you bothering us all night."

"But I'm your server!"

"Then bring wine."

Quigley smiled. "Yes, sir!" He saluted and left.

When Draco turned back around, Hermione was pulling out her chair. He hurried over and did it for her. "Not even going to try and let me be a gentleman?" he said, giving her shoulder a kiss as he helped her scoot in.

"To be perfectly honest, I don't really know what that means. I already told you I have never been on a real date. Unless you count the Yule Ball."

"I don't. Which is precisely why we are here," he said while taking the seat across from her. He reached under the table and began caressing her knee.

"Is *that* gentlemanly?" she asked, giving him a sly smile.

"Knee is fine," he said. "But if I move slightly upward …" His hand began drifting up her thigh.

Hermione smacked it away. "Not here, Draco!"

He laughed and beckoned his finger. She leaned across the table and met him halfway for a kiss.

The door opened and they both turned to see Quigley entering and holding a bottle of wine. He grinned at them. "Already at it?"

Other than Quigley's few interruptions, Draco and Hermione had a fairly private and romantic evening. Bronson had the whole menu already chosen out for them. There were around seven courses, including both a cheese plate and something sweet for dessert. Hermione liked the cake he had made so much that she asked to bring several pieces of it home with them.

When the meal was finished, and Draco and Hermione were left to laugh and kiss over the last of their bottle of wine, Draco ended up standing up and holding his hand out to her. Unsure of what he was up to, Hermione went along with it, gasping as he ended up pulling her into his arms in one swift movement, holding her close as he began to sway to the music.

Hermione smiled as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and nuzzled her head into his chest. "You certainly know how to make a girl swoon," she said.

"Yes, my mother taught me at a very young age how to treat a lady."

"She taught you well," said Hermione, tightening her grip on him. "Thank you, Draco. This was … perfect."

"Don't mention it, love," he said, lifting her chin with his hand and kissing her.

They stayed like that until Quigley came in to let them know that the restaurant was preparing for closing. It had to be done much earlier now so the employees could get home before curfew.

When they got back to the kitchen, it was pretty much empty, other than a busboy doing dishes. Bronson was already long gone. They Flooed home and Hermione immediately noticed Theo's shoes by the front door.

"Oh, Theo's home. Do you think he would like some cake?" she asked.

Draco shrugged. "Maybe. But he's probably passed out and drunk off his arse."

Hermione chuckled. "I'll wake him then."

She walked towards his bedroom and opened the door. "Hey, Theo - Ahh!"

Hermione ran away from the door as quickly as she could and clutched at her heart. Holy shit!

"What?" Draco hurried over to Theo's room and looked inside.

"Bloody fucking hell, Draco! Th'fuck you doing?" shouted Theo. He was currently throwing a blanket over himself and Astoria, who he seemed to be in the middle of shagging.

Draco raised his eyebrows and leaned against the doorframe. "Th'fuck am *I* doing? That's my future wife you currently have your cock in."

"Get out!" he shouted, attempting to throw a pillow at him that barely made it two feet off the bed and slightly veered left.

Yep, Theo was definitely drunk. If it was not obvious by the dazed look in his eyes, then the sloppy way he threw that pillow ought to be proof enough.

"Carry on, then," said Draco, pulling the door shut as he left. Well, it seemed Theo was *not* gay. While drunk, anyway.

"What is he doing?" said Hermione angrily as she pointed at the closed door.

"I would think by now that you would recognize shagging when you saw it."

"But … BUT …"

Just then, the front door opened and Bronson walked in.

Hermione gasped, her face going incredibly red.

Bronson kicked off his shoes but did not walk any further once he saw the look on her face. "Something wrong?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head frantically. "N-no. Why would anything be wrong?" She kept her head low to hide her blush while walking towards the kitchen to put the cake away.

Bronson eyed her curiously before moving his eyes to Draco and asking the same question silently.

Draco shrugged. "Don't mind her. She had a lot of fucking wine."

Bronson still looked suspicious, but he nodded all the same. "Theo around? I need to ask him something."

"N-no," Hermione muttered from the kitchen.

Bronson looked from her to Draco. He cocked an eyebrow.

"He's not back yet, mate. Went out drinking with some other Death Eaters."

"Mind if I wait?" asked Bronson, pulling out a cigarette as he headed towards the balcony.

"Actually, we're planning on shagging pretty loudly in a minute here," said Draco coolly. "It might be better if you waited in your own flat."

"Since when is *that* anything new?" said Bronson with a smirk. "I've heard you shag before. It's really not a -"

Theo's door began to open. Hermione ran across the room in record speed and tried to pull Bronson towards the balcony with her. When he would not budge, she eventually had to give up and go out there herself. She was lucky Astoria had been too distracted to see her earlier, and she wanted to keep that going.

Astoria stepped out of the room, looking a bit dazed as she rubbed at her obviously aching head while carrying her shoes. She blushed when she saw Bronson, immediately trying to brush her fingers through her tangled batch of sex hair.

"Oh, hello."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Hi."

"Fuck!" shouted Theo, pushing past her and nearly knocking her over. He used the wall to brace himself as he tried to make a dart for the washroom, but he only made it about two feet before he toppled over and began vomiting.

"My fucking carpet!" shouted Draco, giving Theo a shove once he was finished.

Theo's eyes remained glazed for a moment as his back hit the wall, but then they began to focus and he noticed the third set of feet in the room. He followed them up and saw Bronson staring down at him, biting his cheek as he tried hard to hide the disappointment he so obviously felt. Theo said nothing, unmoving from his spot on the ground as he continued to gape at him.

"Right," said Bronson, looking away from him and glancing at Astoria. "Nice meeting you." He walked out and joined Hermione on the balcony.

"I should go," said Astoria, looking embarrassed as she headed for the fireplace.

Draco followed her. "Astoria Greengrass. What would your father think, his precious daughter being *ruined* like this?"

Astoria scoffed. "I was *ruined* quite some time ago, Draco." She smiled weakly. "Was that your girlfriend who walked in on us?"

"It might have been," he said.

"I assume if I asked to meet her -"

"That I would say 'fuck no'? You assume correctly."

"Of course." She lifted her shoes and said, "I accidentally wore these across the carpet. I hope you don't mind."

"Theo just vomited all over it, Astoria. A little shoe dirt is the least of my problems right now."

Astoria nodded and glanced over his shoulder at Theo. "Who is that guy who went out to your balcony?"

"Neighbor," was all Draco said.

"He looked upset."

"Not your concern, Astoria."

She nodded again before grabbing a handful of Floo powder and tossing it into the fireplace. "Have a good night, Draco."

While Astoria was still obviously intoxicated, she was definitely more in control

than Theo. Speaking of which … Draco turned around to see him on his hands and knees, shakily using his wand to try and clean up his vomit.

"I'm sorry about the carpet," he mumbled as Draco walked back over.

Draco sighed. "Don't worry about it." He waved his own wand and cleaned up the mess.

Theo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I should go outside." He tried to stand up but his legs were too weak.

Draco grabbed his elbow and pulled him to his feet. "No. Get some fucking rest, Theo. We have business to take care of tomorrow, remember?"

"But -"

"*No*," Draco said firmly. He used his grip on him to lead him towards his bedroom. "Goodnight, Theo."

Theo nodded, looking sadly towards the balcony before stumbling to his bed. Draco shut the door behind him and headed outside.

When he got there, Hermione was leaning over the edge, her arm linked with Bronson's as he did the same.

"Is the spell up?" Draco asked automatically.

"Of course," said Hermione over her shoulder.

Bronson so clearly wiped at his eyes before turning around and calmly saying, "I should be heading home."

"All right," said Hermione, looking at him worriedly before following him back inside. Draco took her hand as she passed and followed after. "Do you need anything?"

"No," said Bronson as he slipped on his shoes. "I'm fine. It's just late and I'm tired."

"I know but -"

"I'm *fine*, Hermione," he said sternly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Hermione nodded, the frown never leaving her face as he opened the door and left the flat.

When the door was shut, Draco looked at her. She turned and attempted to smile.

"Do you want to just go to bed?" he asked, more than aware that the mood of the evening had been somewhat tainted.

Hermione bit her lip and got lost in that pretty head of hers for a moment before eventually shaking it. "No. We shouldn't let this ruin our evening."

Draco grinned. Thank Merlin!

"But *you* need to talk to Theo tomorrow. I think it's time you find out what he's really feeling."

Draco's grin immediately faded into a grimace. Oh, bloody hell.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

The following evening, Draco and Theo sat on top of a bunch of crates in the alley behind some dodgy pub with a Disillusionment Charm and a Silencing Charm in place around them. One of the Extendable Ears Draco had taken from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes currently sat on a higher crate, spurting out the muffled voices of Rabastan, Rodolphus, Quincy Nott, Walden Macnair, and Fenrir Greyback.

The two of them had been following Rabastan for the last few hours, and this was the first place of importance he had gone. Shortly after he went inside, Draco had sneaked in wearing Hermione's invisibility coat and planted the Extendable Ear. And now they were playing the waiting game, just hoping that some topic of interest would come up. It had not happened yet.

"Merlin, they're all so fucking boring," said Theo, unable to stifle back a yawn. "Promise me when we're as old as these bloody pricks that we won't have such lackluster lives."

"*If* we both ever get that old," said Draco.

Theo went stiff. He glanced sideways at him. "Why would you say that?"

"Just being realistic," he said, trying hard to keep his eyes open.

"*I'm telling you, whoever that mini Malfoy piece of shit sent into my fucking flat STOLE some of my wands!*" said Fenrir's voice.

"*You have so many of the bloody things, how could you ever know?*" asked Macnair.

"*I know!*" shouted Fenrir. "*I know every last fuckin' wand I 'ave and some of 'em are missing! Older ones! UNREGISTERED.*"

"*What would Malfoy need with unregistered wands?*" asked Rabastan.

"*Maybe he wants to make a few Protean Charms,*" Rodolphus said mockingly.

"*Shut it!*"

"*Or maybe he doesn't even have them,*" said Quincy.

"*Yeah, tha's wha' I thought!*" said Fenrir. "*Maybe whoever went through just took 'em, so I 'ad our li'l puppet search the Black Market to see if anyone was sellin' 'em.*"

Silence

"*And*?" asked Rabastan impatiently.

"*And nuttin. They weren' there.*

"*But there is a good chance that Malfoy had to hire some street scum to fetch the crests for him,*" said Macnair. "*I mean, who does the little shit even know besides Death Eaters*?"

"*Slags,*" said Fenrir. "*Lots 'n lots o' slags.*"

They all laughed. Draco sneered at the Extendable Ear. Bloody bastards laughing at his expense …

"Who do you think their puppet is?" asked Theo.

"No fucking idea."

"*What about those two neighbors of his?*" asked Quincy. "*He and Theo have been seen a lot with them lately. Especially that dark-haired one who always looks like he's trying to be sultry.*"

Draco laughed but Theo immediately tensed up at the mention of Bronson.

"Something you want to talk about, Theo?"

Theo took a deep breath and said, "No."

"*Yeah, he goes to the Black Market a lot,*" said Fenrir. "*I'll 'ave our puppet keep an eye on 'im.*"

While Draco did feel slight concern for Bronson, it was also a relief that he finally had a legit reason to keep Hermione from sneaking out again. He looked over to see Theo shift uncomfortably.

"Seriously, Theo, if you have something you fucking need to get out -"

Theo whipped his head in Draco's direction and narrowed his eyes. "Yes, because when you talk to me so compassionately like that, I *really* want to tell you shit."

"Well …" Draco gulped. "You can." He went to him in a moment of weakness. Draco supposed he could do the same.

Theo turned his head back straight and stared blankly at the wall. "I'm not a fucking idiot, Draco. I *know* what you're getting at." He paused. "Did Hermione tell you?"

Draco creased his eyebrows.

"I knew it! I knew she couldn't keep her fucking mouth shut, even after I took her out of the bloody fucking flat!"

Draco's interest immediately peaked. "Did Hermione blackmail you or something?"

"Of course she fucking did! She's *your* bloody girlfriend! Two ends of the same fucking stick."

Draco smiled proudly. "She didn't tell me anything, Theo." And he was slightly angry about that. "I saw you and Bronson snogging on my balcony on Christmas."

Theo's eyes widened.

"Pretty fucking horrifying. I believe my eyes might still be bleeding."

"Funny," scoffed Theo.

"So … you like men?"

Theo's face crinkled in disgust. "No."

"Then why would you snog one?" Draco definitely would not.

"I don't know," said Theo. "But I *don't* like men."

"Are you sure?"

"Even though I was pissed off my bloody arse last night, I am well aware that I was enjoying myself while I was fucking Astoria."

"But …"

"No fucking 'buts'! I like women! Simple as that!"

Draco smirked. "But …" This was fun.

Theo was turning red in the face. "I don't fucking know, all right?" he shouted. "I like being around Bronson! There, I admit it! And I haven't been fucking my slags because of him. I didn't even mean to fuck Astoria. I was drunk and feeling sick at the pub, so I went back to your place and she followed me. She fucking followed me and she wouldn't leave. I knew you were going to be home soon so I ushered her into my fucking room so she wouldn't see Hermione and then she started taking off her fucking clothes. I said no, all right? I said no and I tried to push her away, but then she pulled my trousers down and started sucking on my fucking dick. So I caved! I bloody caved and now I don't know what I'm supposed to fucking do about it!"

"Well, first, how about you take a 'fucking' breath," said Draco, who was still trying to process everything he had just heard. Being there for someone was bloody exhausting.

Theo did just that, taking several quick but deep breaths to try and calm himself.

Once his breathing became steady again, Draco pursed his lips and said, "Forgive me if I sound like a bloody woman here, but maybe you should just talk to him."

Theo glanced sideways at him and said, "I don't know if I want to. It would have been much easier to ignore all this confusing shit if he wasn't fucking pursuing to whole damn time."

"So you're just going to pretend like you never fucking snogged him?" Possibly more. Draco really had no idea and he was not about to ask.

Theo shrugged. "Maybe."

"Well … *that's* not going to be incredibly awkward for the rest of us."

Theo had just opened his mouth to speak when they heard Rabastan's voice through the Extendable Ear say, "*About time you got here.*"

"*Sorry,*" said a familiar voice neither of them could quite place. "*I got a bit held up.*"

"*Did you get it?*" asked Rabastan.

There was some shuffling, followed by a loud '*clang*' as something was put onto the table.

"*Excellent,*" said Rabastan.

"*This'll get that fucking prick talking.*"

"Am I that 'fucking prick'?" asked Draco.

"Dunno," said Theo with a shrug. "Probably."

"*And did you bring any news of the resistance?*"

Draco's eyes went wide. "It's the rat."

"Oooh, scandalous," said Theo, leaning in closer. "About time something interesting happened."

"*No. My sources say they are planning something big but they don't have the details yet. All they know is that it has something to do with Hermione Granger.*"

Everything in Draco's stomach began to shift at the mention of her name. And this person had called her Hermione. Not Potter's Mudblood. Who the hell was it?

"I swear I know that voice, mate," said Theo.

"Yeah," said Draco with a light nod. "Me too."

"*And they are still willing to feed you this information?*" asked Rabastan.

"*The resistance often lacks in communication. They know I have been trustworthy in the past, so they will never question me.*"

"*And that's why I like keeping you around,*" said Rabastan with an obvious smile on his face. "*Find out what they're planning and meet me back here in two days' time.*"

"*Yes, sir.*"

Footsteps.

Draco paused for only a moment, his heart feeling heavy as he thought of a rescue plan for Hermione being ruined. And then feeling heavier at the thought of her leaving. Still, he had to try. He had to help her. To keep her safe.

Pulling the Extendable Ear back, Draco lifted the Disillusionment and Silencing Charms over them and said, "Come on. We're moving."

Draco jumped off his crate, followed shortly by a skeptical Theo. "What do you plan to do?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Draco. "But I'm going to find out who that fucking was."

They both pulled their hoods on as they excited the alley, joining the large group of people smoking pipes outside of the dodgy pub.

Draco kept his eyes fixed steadily on the door, waiting for a familiar face to exit.

Then a man came out. His hood was on but something about him just seemed out of place. The man walked in his direction and Draco backed up towards the alley once more. He grabbed the man's arm as he passed, flinging him into the alley and slamming him against the wall. He lifted his wand to his throat while Theo moved in front of them, so as to block them from any passersby's.

The man's hood fell slightly back and Draco suddenly found himself looking into the surprised eyes of Neville Longbottom.

"Longbottom?" he said.

"Malfoy!" shouted Neville, suddenly reaching for his wand.

Draco gave his own wand a wave and Neville's came flying into his hand. He kept both pointed steadily at his throat. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I … don't know."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "You don't know?"

"Looks to me like you're bloody betraying your friends," said Theo while slightly glancing back at them.

"No … I …" Neville continued to gaze at Draco with glazed eyes.

"Th'fuck is wrong with him?" asked Theo.

When Draco turned his head to look at Theo, Neville took this opportunity to knee him in the groin. When Draco flinched, he took off running down the alley. Before he could get too far, Draco raised Neville's wand. *Stupefy*.

Neville fell forward, practically belly flopping as he landed hard on the ground. He may not have had his baby fat anymore, but he still bounced, making Draco and Theo laugh hysterically.

"What the hell we going to do with him?" asked Theo as they both walked over to Neville's stunned body.

"Take him home with us," said Draco, giving him a kick before reaching down and drooping Neville's arm around his shoulders. Theo did the same on his other side. "We'll just pretend he's passed out drunk. And keep your fucking hood up. The last thing we need is to be seen here."

Theo nodded and adjusted his hood before they walked back towards the street with Neville in tow.

"Act naturally," said Draco.

As soon as they stepped out of the alley, Theo became very nervous. In an attempt to 'act natural', he suddenly found himself bursting into song.

*"Oh Slytherin, the house of those*

*Pureblooded, great and cunning,*

*While the mead and firewhiskey flows,*

*We flee school without the running,*

*The other houses sleep all night,*

*Playing it good, honest and true,*

*But the Slytherin boys drink till light,*

*They are much cleverer than you.*

*Slytherin!*

*Oh Slytherin!*

*We are so much better than Harry Potter!*

*Slytherin!*

*Oh Slytherin!*

*Thank Merlin we are not all fucking martyrs!*

"Theo!" shouted Draco.

Theo whipped his head and looked at him. "Hmm?"

"*What* are you fucking singing?"

"It's that song, remember? The one you wrote when we used to sneak out to drink in Hogsmeade during fifth year."

"Yes, I remember the bloody song. But *why* are you fucking singing it?"

Theo shrugged. "I dunno. It's the only drinking song I have memorized. Every other one I know I've learned while shit-faced so I always forget them by morning."

"How about you just don't fucking sing, all right?"

"Oh, fine," said Theo with a roll of his eyes. "You're no fun."

The two of them went and stood on the corner where the Knight Bus would be arriving shortly. Being nothing but deadweight, it was hard to keep a firm grip on Neville so they had to constantly adjust themselves.

While they were waiting there, Rabastan and the others walked out of the pub. Draco and Theo kept their heads straight as they walked right by them, heading for the Lestranges carriage. Draco had cast a Tracking Spell on it so they would always know where it was headed. But, knowing the hour, he assumed they were heading home before curfew. A part of him still wanted to follow them and see if they were up to anything else, but getting Neville out of here and questioning him was the most important thing.

As Rabastan climbed into the carriage, Draco caught sight of the brown sack he was carrying. A ruffled green leaf was poking out of it. A plant. That must have

been what Neville brought for them. Now he just needed to figure out what sort of plant it was.

The Knight Bus pulled up right as Fenrir began sniffing the air. He smelled something familiar, but before he could place it, Draco and Theo had boarded the bus and it took off.

When they finally got back to their flat, Draco used his unregistered wand to cast a Levitating Charm on him and guided him up the stairs. There was no way he was carrying that deadweight up five flights.

Draco opened the door to the flat and found Hermione, Bronson and Quigley all sitting on the sofa. They smiled as he entered, but then when the floating body followed in after him, they were all out of their seats and running over. Bronson sighed in relief when he saw Theo walk in after him.

"What happened?" asked Hermione, running over to the body and pulling the hood back so she could get a good look at the person. She gasped. "Neville? Draco, why -?"

"We caught him feeding Rabastan information on the resistance," said Draco, guiding Neville into a chair. He gave another wave of his wand and ropes tied him to it.

"What?" said Hermione in disbelief. "That's not possible. Neville is the most loyal person I know. He would never -"

"Well, he did," said Theo, going in front of Neville and pulling out his extra wand. "Shall I?" he asked, looking at Draco.

Draco nodded.

Theo aimed his wand and shouted, "*Rennervate*!"

Neville's eyes popped open and he began looking around the flat frantically. "Where …?" His gaze landed on Draco. He gulped. Then his eyes drifted to Hermione. He blinked several times. "Her … Hermione?"

Hermione sighed and stepped forward. "Yes, Neville. It's me."

"W-what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"I … I must go! I must report to Rabastan the moment I learn the location of Hermione Granger!"

Neville began fidgeting uncontrollably in his chair, one of his tied hands trying hard to reach into his pocket. Draco beat him to it and ended up pulling out a small version of the Longbottom family crest.

"Well, that's one mystery solved," said Draco, giving it a toss and catching it. "Did Rabastan make more of these?"

"Give that back!" shouted Neville. "I must report to him! I must let him know that Draco Malfoy is really a traitor! *TRAITOR*!"

Hermione's jaw dropped slightly. "Neville, what is wrong with you?"

"*TRAITOR*!"

"What did you give Rabastan earlier, Longbottom?" asked Draco, leaning in closer.

Neville shut his mouth and sucked his lips in.

"How long have you been working for him? What is he planning?"

"Don't you have any Veritaserum?" asked Bronson from behind him.

At the mention of a Truth Potion, Neville's face began to scrunch and tense strangely. He let out a muffled cry, his lips opening slightly as blood started to pour out of his mouth.

"What the fuck?" shouted Draco.

Theo stepped forward and pried Neville's mouth open. Something small, pink and drenched in blood fell out of it. Hermione screamed as she realized it was his tongue.

"Fucking shit!" shouted Theo, stepping away from it.

"Theo, make sure he doesn't bleed out!" ordered Hermione as she ran towards the kitchen. "Draco, come help me!"

Draco ran after her and watched as she pulled two cauldrons out of the cupboard, followed by a ton of ingredients.

"You will need to make a Blood-Replenishing Potion while I make and Annecto Paste. Please, please tell me you have Dittany?"

"Third cupboard from the left, second shelf, towards the right," said Draco as he began throwing ingredients into his cauldron.

Hermione grabbed the Dittany and threw about half of it into a mortar. She began grinding it with the pestle until it was practically powder. Then she threw it into her cauldron with several other ingredients.

Once the fire was on, Hermione needed a wand. Unfortunately, she was wearing her pajama bottoms that had no pockets. Her wand was in the bedroom. She began looking around frantically, but then something was being held out in front of her. It was Draco's wand. His *real* wand.

"I'll come up with an excuse to tell the Dark Lord later," he said while waving the unregistered wand she had given him over his cauldron.

Hermione took the wand from him, wanting desperately to take a moment and thank him for the gesture. He was letting her use his wand. Something so dear to him because it was one of the last things he had shared with his mother. And he trusted her enough with it.

"Hermione, focus!"

Hermione shook her head and came back to the here and now. Right! There would be plenty of time to get sentimental later. For now, she needed to save Neville.

Hermione finished her paste first and ran over to where Quigley was working on keeping Neville alive - since he was the best at Healing Spells - while Theo kept him conscious.

With a grimace, Hermione picked his bloody tongue up off the floor. "Bronson, hold his mouth open."

Bronson shuddered before stepping forward and using his fingers to pry it open. Hermione stuck the tongue back in place and began rubbing the paste on the tear. She had to use almost all of it before it finally began to reattach itself.

As soon as that was done, Bronson removed his fingers, wiping them off in disgust on his clothes. Neville's head hung low, his eyes drooping as all of him, especially his lips, became horribly pale.

Draco came over and lifted his head again so he could pour the Blood-Replenishing Potion down his throat. Neville had barely swallowed when his eyes closed and he became unconscious.

Checking his heartbeat, Hermione sighed in relief. "Draco, move him onto the sofa."

Draco nodded. He undid Neville's binds and levitated him over to the sofa, where he laid him down with his head on a pillow.

Hermione went over and put her favorite blanket over him. She looked at him sadly before saying, "This isn't Neville."

Draco looked at her curiously.

"Check for the Imperius Curse. I am almost certain that it is the cause of this."

Draco nodded again. He waved his wand over Neville and, sure enough, he had definitely been inflicted with it. Several times.

"It's strong. He must have been fighting it," said Draco.

"You can do that?" asked Theo.

Draco narrowed his eyes at him and shook his head. "Don't even think about it."

"Can you remove it before he wakes up?" asked Hermione. "I really don't want a repeat performance of this." She looked down at her bloody hands and cringed.

While Hermione went into the washroom to wash her hands, Draco removed the Imperius Curse from Neville. Theo cast several complex Lock Charms on the front door so he could not panic and try to make a run for it when he woke up. Even though it was probably going to be a while.

"So are we stuck up here, then?" asked Quigley.

Draco looked up at the clock over the mantle and saw that is was already a quarter past midnight. Curfew must have hit during the whole tongue fiasco.

"Looks like it," he said. "You can take our bed. We're probably going to be up for a while." Draco glanced at Hermione, who was sitting on the edge of the sofa with Neville's hand in hers. Her eyes were fixed on his face which, even though a great deal of color had returned to it, still looked pained and sickly. He had obviously not been in good health for quite some time.

"Ah, sweet!" shouted Quigley, standing up and running into Draco and Hermione's bedroom. There was a big 'plop' as he must have jumped onto the bed. "Dude … this is soooo comfortable!"

Looking at Bronson, Draco asked, "Are you not going to join him?"

Bronson smirked. "Nah. I've been banned from sharing a bed with Quigley ever since I accidentally groped him on a budget vacation we took a few years back."

"It was *not* all right!" shouted Quigley, the door to the bedroom suddenly shutting.

"I can turn my bed into twin beds," said Theo, taking out his unregistered wand and heading towards his room.

Bronson followed him with his eyes, looking unsure for a moment before glancing at Hermione.

"Could you please, Bronson?" she said, not even having to look up to know his eyes were on her. "I really just need a moment."

Bronson breathed in heavily and said, "All right," before following Theo in and shutting the door behind him.

"So is he mad at him?" asked Draco as soon as he was gone.

"No. I think reality just finally set in." She gave a faint smile.

Hermione kept her eyes on Neville and Draco kept his eyes on her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "When did Ron say he was taken again?"

"Four months ago."

Hermione sighed. "And how many times has Rabastan given information from his 'contact'?"

Draco thought about this. "I would say around five. But only three of those times did the Dark Lord follow through."

"And did people …" She gulped. "… die?"

He knew she meant people in the resistance. Now he sighed. "A few, yes."

"Neville will never forgive himself."

"We could lie to him," said Draco.

Hermione shook her head. "No. It is better to know the truth."

Draco went and took a seat on the armchair that was pointed towards Neville's face. He held out his arms and, without looking, Hermione stood up, turned and settled herself into his lap while he wrapped them around her.

For an hour, they sat there waiting for Neville to wake up.

"I am going to make us some tea," said Hermione as her eyes began to droop.

She stood up and went into the kitchen. While she fiddled around in there, Draco leaned forward on his knees, thinking about how great it would be to have a cigarette right now.

He had just started looking through his pockets when Neville began to stir. He looked at him right as his eyes began to open. Neville blinked several times, bringing the world into focus again. Then he saw Draco.

"Evening, Longbottom."

Neville's eyes widened, and then he was screaming. His hands began searching for his wand, but Draco still had it, which he showed him in hopes of calming him down. But this only made Neville scream louder.

"Th'fuck is going on?" shouted Theo, running out of his room with his wand raised.

Becoming even more panicked by the appearance of the second Death Eater, Neville spun off the side of the sofa, obviously getting dizzy by his quick actions but still jumping up and running through them. Reaching the front door, he began pulling at it, but Theo's Lock Charms stuck.

"Neville! Neville, it's all right!" shouted Hermione, hurrying towards him and holding out her hands defensively. "Please, calm down!"

Neville turned and looked at her. "Hermione?"

"Yes, it's me," she said.

"You already fucking saw her, remember?" said Theo.

Neville shook his head frantically. "N-no. I … I don't remember anything. Where …" He began looking around. "Where am I?"

Draco stood up from his armchair and slowly walked towards him. "Welcome to my home, Longbottom."

"Neville, what is the last thing you remember?" asked Hermione.

"Hermione, what are you doing here with *them*?" Neville looked from Draco to Theo. Then Bronson and Quigley were both walking into the front room. "How many people are here?"

Hermione looked over her shoulder and said, "This is it. Sorry if it's a bit overwhelming, but Bronson and Quigley got stuck here after curfew."

"Curfew?" repeated Neville, looking perplexed. "What curfew?"

"You really don't remember any of it?" asked Theo, crossing his arms. "Nothing after being put under the Imperius Curse?"

"The Imperius Curse?" said Neville, his eyes widening yet again. "Who put me under it? How … how long has it been?"

Theo's face immediately dropped. He darted for the balcony, slamming the glass door behind him. Bronson stared after him but he did not follow.

"Please, just sit down Neville and we'll explain everything," Hermione said in a calm voice. She motioned to the sofa. Neville looked at it, but then his eyes drifted to Draco's hand.

"I want my wand," he said.

Draco scoffed. "I don't think so."

"Draco, just give it to him," said Hermione.

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows.

"If it makes him feel more secure than he should have it."

"How about we all just put our wands down where everyone can see them?" suggested Bronson.

Now Neville scoffed. "What do I look like, an idiot?"

Draco had to hold his tongue.

"I've fought in battle with Malfoy before. I already know that he knows wandless magic."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Fine." He tossed Neville's wand at him. Neville stumbled before catching it. "If you try anything, Longbottom, I can assure you that I will react twice as fast."

Draco went back to his armchair and Neville headed for the sofa. But then he stopped and looked at Hermione. *Really* looked at her. "It's really you?" he asked.

Hermione smiled and nodded. "Yes, it is."

Looking nervously to the ground, Neville fidgeted with his wand and said, "I really didn't think this is how our reunion would go. Should we … should we hug?"

Hermione chuckled softly. "Yes, Neville, I would like that very much."

Neville slowly moved towards her, looking nervous as he lifted his arms. He did not go the full distance between them, so Hermione had to close that last gap.

While they were hugging, Neville's shaky body began to ease. "Merlin, it really *is* you."

"How can you tell?" she asked curiously.

"I … I remember your hugs," he answered, his eyes beginning to tear. "Hermione, you're … you're alive. Merlin, you're alive!"

Neville's grip on her tightened as they both began to cry in each other's arms.

"Oh, this is sweet," said Bronson, watching them with a wide grin.

Draco felt the opposite, of course, but he knew better than to voice his opinion in that moment. Still, he did not like that bloody Gryffindor touching her like that.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," said Quigley, yawning. "I'm fucking tired. Night, all." He went back into Draco and Hermione's room and shut the door.

Bronson turned to go back into Theo's room, but, after a momentary pause, he veered towards the balcony instead.

"You should really take a seat, Neville," said Hermione, finally pulling out of their

hug. "I'll go grab us all tea and then we can talk."

For the next few hours, Draco and Hermione explained everything to him. Well, not everything, but the most important details were all brushed upon.

Draco had been hoping to use Neville to spy on Rabastan, but with his loss of memory they all came to the assumption that it would do little good. And quite possibly get Neville killed. He was not even sure where he had been staying for the past four months. Hermione tried to use Legilimency on him, since he would not let Draco do it, but there was nothing. His mind had been completely wiped clean.

"Well, this ended up being a fucking waste," said Draco.

Hermione gave him a very stern and warning look. "No it has not, Draco. Neville is safe. That can hardly be considered a '*waste*'."

Draco looked at her and said, "That's not what I meant. We should have realized his memories would be erased and used Legilimency *before* we took off the Imperius Curse."

"I'm sure Rabastan thought to put shields around his head. It probably would have done no good."

"Whatever," said Draco. "I'm still pissed. Longbottom here gave them some bloody plant to use against me and we have no fucking idea what it is."

Hermione noticed as Neville looked to the ground almost ashamedly. It was obvious that he was embarrassed by this whole ordeal, and he still did not look well.

"At least tell me you remember who your bloody source of information is?"

"I have an idea," Neville said quietly.

"Then maybe we can still find out what they're planning for Hermione, then come up with some bloody lie to tell Rabastan when you meet with him in two days."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "He most certainly is not keeping that meeting, Draco! How can you even consider putting Neville back in that sort of danger?" she asked angrily.

"Comes with the territory, sweetheart," said Draco. "He's in the resistance, and we need him to keep playing the bloody part of Imperiused traitor for as long as we

can."

Hermione huffed, but she did not continue to argue. She knew he was right. "You should get some rest, Neville. We can continue this discussion in the morning," she said while looking at the clock. "The curfew will be lifted in a few minutes. I'm going to send Quigley home." Hermione stood up and headed for their room.

Draco also stood up and went to the balcony, where Theo and Bronson still were. When he got there, Theo was huddled on the ground while Bronson was standing above him and smoking a cigarette. They both looked over at Draco as he came out.

"Something wrong, mate?" he asked Theo.

"Oh, *nothing*," scoffed Theo. "Just that I'm going to lose my fucking memory when all of this is over."

"You don't know that," said Draco.

"Yes I do," retorted Theo. "You're going to die saving fucking Granger, I'm going to lose my memories, and then I'm going to spend the rest of my life thinking I was betrayed by my oldest mate."

"Well, if that's your biggest fear then I'm touched."

"Not funny," said Theo, burying his head in his knees.

Draco crossed his arms and sighed. "Well, I feel there is a simple solution to all of this."

"And what's that?"

He shrugged. "Don't lose your memories when the Imperius Curse is removed."

Theo looked up. "What?"

"I'm *ordering* you not to lose your memories, Theo. And since I am the one who cast the curse on you, you must listen."

"I don't think it works like that," said Theo, sneering.

"Why not?" asked Draco. "Rabastan intended for Longbottom's head to be wiped clean, and I intend for yours to remain as is. Only, you need to block your memories from anyone who might be seeking them."

Theo looked to the ground and sighed. "You better hope that fucking works. I really don't want things to go back to how they were before."

"I believe it will," said Draco. He looked at Bronson, who looked as skeptical as he felt. "It's time to come inside. Curfew is about over and I believe Hermione is kicking Quigley out of our bed."

Sure enough, when they got inside Quigley was standing by the door, rubbing at his groggy eyes. The clock chimed four and he waited a moment before removing the Locking Charms and opening the front door. "Ready, mate?" he asked, looking at Bronson.

Bronson nodded before following him out, taking one last look back at Theo before shutting the door behind him.

"Neville, you should get some rest," said Hermione. She looked at Draco. "I really don't think we should leave him alone after he lost so much blood earlier. I'll stay up and watch him."

"Like hell you will," said Draco. "You already look exhausted."

"I'm fine," she said.

"No," said Draco. "Hermione, go to bed. I'll stay -"

"I'll do it," Theo said suddenly.

The other three all looked at him.

"But you have Death Eater duties in four hours," said Draco. "You need to get at least some slee -"

"It's fine," said Theo. "I can't sleep right now, anyway." He was already sinking into the closest armchair. "Longbottom, go to fucking sleep. And *don't* start to die on me. I really don't feel like dealing with that shit."

Neville looked at Hermione skeptically. "No offense, but I would really feel safer on my own."

"Too bad because I've already made myself comfortable," said Theo. "Now lie the fuck down."

"Are you sure about this, Theo?" asked Hermione.

He looked at her and nodded. "Really, I'm fine. I'll wake you before I leave."

Hermione nodded back and said, "Goodnight then." She looked at Neville. "Do you need any extra blankets or pillows?"

"No," said Neville. "I tend to overheat when I'm sleeping, and these pillows are fine." He grabbed one off of the sofa and fluffed it up.

"Well, all right," said Hermione. "I will see you in a few hours."

Hermione walked towards the bedroom with Draco just behind her. When the door shut. Neville looked curiously at Theo and said, "Did they just go into the same room?"

"Looks like it," said Theo as he picked at his fingernails.

Inside of the bedroom, Hermione gasped. "Oh, shit!"

"Ah, love, you know I can't contain myself when you curse," said Draco, wrapping his arms around her waist.

She smiled. "Don't get any ideas."

"If you're not trying to seduce me, then what's with the language?"

"We just came into the bedroom together."

Draco cocked an eyebrow.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well, we never exactly mentioned to Neville that we're 'involved'. Sometimes I forget that we're a secret outside of these walls," she said with a sigh.

Draco cupped her head in his hand and kissed her forehead. "Not forever."

"I hope not." Hermione smiled softly and puckered her lips. Draco leaned in and kissed them. He would have to make note of Neville's reaction when they, undoubtedly, talked about them being 'involved' with him in a few hours, and then times that by ten for when Potter and Weasley found out. Merlin, he hoped he would be there for that.

# Chapter 22: I Call Your Name

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"Did you find anything yet?" asked Hermione, looking over Neville's shoulder as he flipped through one of the books Draco had given her on plants.

"No," he answered. "I have a couple ideas, but I will need Malfoy to verify the leaf for me when he gets back."

Hermione crinkled her nose. "You know, it would really be handy of one of us was an artist."

"I'm an artist in the kitchen!" called Bronson, who was currently throwing ingredients into a pot. "Does that count?"

"Only when we're hungry," said Hermione. Her stomach growled right on cue.

Just then, the alarm went off on the fireplace. No one moved. It turned out Neville knew a clever trick that let them give Draco and Theo their own specific alarms. This one was Draco's.

Sure enough, Draco appeared a few seconds later and stepped out of the fireplace. Then Theo's alarm went off.

"Any luck, Longbottom?" asked Draco.

"Maybe," said Neville, flipping to his marked pages. "Come see."

Draco walked over as Theo appeared in the fireplace. He looked at the open page. "No. The leaves were sharper."

Neville flipped to another page.

"The leaves were greener."

Theo reached into his bag and pulled out another book. He tossed it at Neville. "Merry Christmas."

Neville picked it up and gasped. "This book is forbidden. It has every lethal plant known to man. W-where did you get it?"

"Don't ask," said Theo before sinking into an armchair. "Hundreds of laws were broken, a few innocent lives lost. A truly messy ordeal. Dismembered limbs, heads hanging by nothing but a thin slice of skin …"

"Neville, he's joking," Hermione said quickly when she noticed the sick shade of green he was turning. "Stop messing with him, Theo."

Theo smirked. "You would think he'd have a stronger stomach after being involved in a bloody war for five years - Ouch!"

Draco walked by and smacked Theo on the back of the head before going over and sitting next to Hermione, automatically putting on arm around her waist and pulling her towards him. Neville tried really hard not to stare but, in two days, he had not exactly gotten used to the idea of them being together. He had asked to check for the Imperius Curse on her, as well as Amortentia, at least ten times. She had consented the first three times, but now she was tired of having to prove herself.

Just then, Draco leaned over and kissed her cheek. Neville could not hide his grimace.

"If you don't like it, Longbottom, then stop fucking staring," said Draco.

"Sorry," Neville said with a slight blush.

"Whatever. I'm going to go get our supplies ready." Draco stood up and disappeared into his room.

"Food's ready!" Bronson called from the kitchen.

Hermione went over to help him prepare the plates. But then she noticed there were only four. "Aren't you eating with us, Bronson?"

"No," he said while biting a piece of asparagus. "I have plans later."

Theo glanced in their direction. Bronson tried not to notice.

Draco came back out of his room, now carrying his bag. He grabbed two of the finished plates and went over to the sofa, dropping one into Neville's lap from behind. "Eat quickly, Longbottom. Rabastan moved your meeting up an hour-" He pulled the Longbottom family crest out of his pocket and showed him the time written on the back of it. "- and we don't know how much time we need with this source of yours."

Draco ate his food while standing. Hermione brought a plate over to Theo, but did not grab her own right away. She stood behind Draco, wrapping her arms around his back. "He looks really nervous," she whispered. "You swear you'll take care of him?"

Draco looked back into her worried eyes and smiled. "I already said I would. Relax, Hermione. We'll be fine."

She nodded and kissed him.

"Ready, Longbottom?" he asked.

"Yeah … I guess so," answered Neville while standing up. He took his plate into the kitchen, Bronson noticing that he barely took two bites. "Sorry. It really was good."

Bronson smiled as said, "It's fine. I'll keep it warm for you for later. When your stomach isn't quite so twisted." He waved his wand at the plate.

"Thanks," said Neville, turning back around just in time to see Draco lean in and kiss Hermione as she took his plate from him. He grimaced again.

"I know, it really *is* nauseating," said Bronson. "But they're happy." He paused. "Well … as happy as anyone can be considering their tragic lives."

Neville nodded lightly. "I'm … trying to understand."

"Let's get a move on, Longbottom!" Draco called while heading for the door.

Neville followed after him, pausing momentarily by Hermione. She gave him a hug and said, "Good luck, Neville. Have faith in Draco, all right? I promise he won't let anything bad happen to you."

Neville pulled away and nodded. He went to the door, put on his shoes and cloak, and followed Draco out.

"Why isn't Nott coming with us, again?" asked Neville as they headed down the

stairs.

"Why? You trust him more than you trust me?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow.

Neville thought about this. "No, I suppose not," he answered. "I never really knew him in school."

"And you knew me?"

"No," said Neville. "But you were a presence. He wasn't."

Draco supposed he could understand that. The truth was, Theo was a bit of a loner in school. They had known each other since childhood and had always been friends, but Theo had far less desire to be part of Draco's group than Crabbe and Goyle did, so they sort of drifted, even though they were not against sneaking out and getting drunk from time to time. Their friendship only really rekindled after they became Death Eaters. A sad reality. But Draco always had more in common with Theo than he did with Goyle and, while he would never admit it out loud, he really did like having him around. And so did Hermione. But *that* he hated.

"Theo isn't coming because I want to draw as little attention to us as possible. And, if there comes a time when I need to reveal myself to protect your arse, I want Theo as far away from this as possible."

"Why would you need to reveal yourself?" asked Neville nervously.

"If things go sour, Longbottom. And, if that happens, you're going to need to suck it up and pretend to be under my Imperius Curse. Understand?"

Neville took a deep breath and nodded.

"In fact, why don't you suck it up right now? If Rabastan sees you like this then we don't stand a bloody chance."

They reached the bottom floor and Draco took out Hermione's invisibility cloak. He put it on and let Neville take the lead. He had studied Hermione's map earlier and had a fairly good idea of where they were and where they needed to go. They were walking, since Draco did not want Neville to be seen entering the Knight Bus from this area. He did not know who he knew and planned on avoiding as many people as possible.

It was quite a walk but, eventually, they ended up on one of the deserted Muggle streets of London. Even in its prime, Draco could tell this was not the nicest of places. Why would anyone choose to live someplace so dodgy? The city had an

abundance of empty homes they could have taken and registered.

Then Neville went up to a door, did a special knock and Mundungus Fletcher answered. Ah! Now it all made sense. Dodgy place, dodgy wizard. Draco never knew him personally, but he knew enough about him to understand that he was hardly the epitome of sophistication.

"You," he said, eyeing Neville questioningly. "You come alone?"

"Yes," Neville said coolly. Draco was impressed.

"You know the rules," said Mundungus, stepping forward a little and holding out his hand. Draco took this moment to slip into the house.

Neville reached into his pocket and pulled out his wand. He handed it to Mundungus before following him inside.

"I assume you've come here for info on Hermione Granger," said Mundungus, leading Neville into the main room of the small house. Draco had to hold in a moan of distaste. The entire place was cluttered with old newspapers and magazines, dirty plates and empty apothecary bottles. "Tea?" he asked, holding up a kettle.

Neville eyed the dirty mugs beside it and said, "No thanks." Good call. "And yes. I was hoping you found out more information on what the resistance is planning."

"Aye," said Mundungus. "I did. But it'll cost ya."

Neville took out a pouch of Galleons Draco had given him and handed it over. "I believe this will cover it."

Mundungus opened the pouch and ran his fingers through it. He smiled, showing off his jagged, yellow teeth. Draco grimaced. This man was repulsive.

"Funny, isn't it? How after all these months, you still haven't found a better way to your own people than me."

Neville pursed his eyebrows. "I'm sorry?"

"I contacted 'em today. Spoke to one o' the Weasley brats. Didn't want to give me the info so I gave 'em your name. Funny thing. They say you been missing since before the curfew. Now, if that's true, then how the hell are you in front of me now?"

Without so much as a flinch, Neville looked him in the eye and said, "No one is

supposed to know of my presence here, Mundungus. Least of all you. But, like you said, the curfew went up and I lost my means to contact the resistance. So here I am. Now, if you let me use the phone we both know you have shoved under the sofa, I can straighten this out with them and we can continue business as usual."

It was a good enough lie. One Draco would never buy, but he had a feeling Mundungus just might be that thick.

There was a long pause as Mundungus studied Neville, scanning him up and down, searching for any sign that he might be lying. There was nothing. But then a drop of sweat dripped from his forehead. A clear and vivid sign that something was amiss. But Draco was a trained Death Eater. Surely this man would not notice something as minute as -

"Is it warm in here, Longbottom?"

*Shit.* Apparently, slimy criminals and Death Eaters were trained similarly.

Mundungus started to lift his wand but, before he could strike, Draco pointed his. *Impedimenta*!

Mundungus screamed as he went flying backwards, slamming against the wall. Two branch-like hands came out of it and held him in place. Draco's own take on the spell. He pulled off his invisibility cloak and put it on the sofa, Mundungus continuing to scream as he stepped towards him.

"AH! It's M-Malfoy! What are you going to do? You gonna turn me inside out? Like Oscar Venner?"

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "My reputation precedes me."

"Did you really turn someone inside out, Malfoy?" asked Neville, taking several nervous steps backwards.

"No," said Draco. "Just a rumor. I was a young Death Eater back then. I merely tortured Venner into a confession. The Dark Lord turned him inside out." He looked into Mundugus's eyes and began waving his wand in front of him. "I really wish you had not made this difficult." His wand stopped dead, pointed straight at his head. "*Legilimens*!"

Merlin, it was disgusting in there. If at all possible, he was even slimier inside than he was out. Draco went straight for his most recent memories, picking out everything that had to do with the telephone. It did not take him long.

Draco pulled out of his mind. "They didn't tell him anything. Bloody fucking waste."

"Yeah, that's right! So there's no reason ta kill -"

"*Obliviate*!"

Mundungus's eyes went wide and blank. When his head began swaying to and fro, Draco knocked him unconscious and released the spell holding him to the wall. He reached down and pulled Neville's wand out of his pocket.

"Care to make a phone call?" asked Draco, turning back towards Neville.

Neville gulped before pulling the phone out from under the sofa and dialing. He let it ring for a good two minutes, but no one answered.

"No good," he said, finally hanging it up. "Whatever plan they have, it must already be in motion. If they don't even have the phones guarded then it must be big."

"Care to venture a guess?"

Neville shrugged. "I dunno. But they have always talked about doing something during You-Know-Who's speech he makes every New Year's. I just don't know what that would have to do with Hermione."

Draco sighed. "Still, we should keep our guard up."

"But if they're trying to help Hermione -"

"Endangering her is more like it," said Draco. "Any rescue attempt could very well expose her. We need to get her out without drawing any attention to her. Somehow, I don't think your bloody resistance mates understand that."

Neville nodded. "Yeah. Sometimes Harry and Ron can be a bit thick, especially when it comes to her."

Draco nodded. "Well, onto our next stop, Longbottom." He handed Neville his wand back before picking up his invisibility cloak from the sofa and putting it on.

"Shouldn't we do something with him?" asked Neville, nodding towards Mundungus.

"Nah," said Draco. "I get the feeling he wakes up on the floor with no memories of the night before a lot. This is not the first time his mind has been fucked with. There were holes all over the bloody thing."

Neville stood up and walked towards the front door. Draco followed him, pulling on his hood as soon as his hand touched the knob.

"You did all right here, Longbottom. But now for the hard part."

Neville gulped loudly before opening the door.

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"Please, Theo?"

"No."

"Please, please,  please?"

"Did I not just fucking say no?"

Hermione pouted. He was really making this difficult, and it was not like with Draco where she could just start kissing his neck to get what she wanted. The only methods that ever seemed to work on Theo was blackmail, and with everything between him and Bronson out in the open … well, she was sort of out of options.

"Level with me, Theo. What exactly would I have to do to get you to go down the basement with me?"

Theo smirked. "Well, I would not be completely against you getting naked."

Hermione huffed.

"But I really don't feel like being killed by Draco tonight," he said with a chuckle.

"You've already seen me in my bra," she said, crossing her arms.

Theo's face dropped as he recalled the incident. "That was an accident."

"Still, imagine if Draco were to ever find out about that. Accident or not, I am pretty sure he would not hesitate -"

"Are you blackmailing me again?"

Hermione smiled. That was not her intention but … "I suppose I am."

"Oh, fuck you," said Theo with a sneer. He stood up from his armchair. "We're not staying down there for long."

"That's fine," said Hermione. "I just want the distraction. So I don't …" She gulped … "think too much, about everything that can go wrong."

They both went over to the door and put on their shoes. Then Theo opened it and walked out of the flat with Hermione just behind him. They had not even gone down two flights of stairs yet when Theo put up his arm to stop her. Hermione froze as she heard a knock. Poking her head underneath Theo's arm, she noticed a man she did not recognize standing outside of Bronson and Quigley's door. He looked up at Theo and gave a half-smile before squinting to try and see the shadowed face underneath his arm.

The door opened and Bronson's voice said, "You're late," in a playful tone.

"Sorry," said the man. "I got a little lost." He stepped inside. "I think that Death Eater who went out the backdoor in our kitchen that one time is on the staircase."

"Oh?" Bronson poked his head out of the door and looked up at Theo. "And so he is."

Theo seemed pretty much frozen, so Hermione lifted her head over his shoulder and said, "We were just heading down to the basement to distract ourselves. Right, Theo?"

He said nothing.

"Theo?" She pinched his side.

Without reacting, he said, "Right."

Bronson nodded. "Well, have fun then," he said before shutting the door behind him.

"So you know him?" asked Hermione as soon as Bronson was gone.

"He's a waiter at the restaurant he works at," said Theo emotionlessly. "He was being a bit flirty."

"Oh," said Hermione, biting her lip. "Well, maybe we should get to the …"

Before she could even finish her sentence, Theo was sinking down and sitting on the step, his eyes still steadily fixed on Bronson's front door.

"All right then," she said, taking a seat beside him. "I suppose we can just … sit for a while." Well, so much for keeping herself distracted.

Draco followed Neville to the back of the crowded pub, trying his best not to bump too roughly into anyone. He did not want them looking around, only to find that no one was there.

When they got to a back hall where there were several doors, Neville paused for a moment and looked around blankly. Draco gave him a shove in the right direction, since he had followed Rabastan in here last time to plant the Extendable Ear. The door was guarded by a large wizard who Draco recognized as one of Fenrir's werewolves. He opened it for them and, even while standing incredibly close to Neville, Draco barely made it inside before it was shutting behind them.

Unlike the last time, Rabastan was here alone, sitting at a large table and drinking firewhiskey out of a glass with ice. "Where have you been?" he asked while motioning for Neville to sit.

"What do you mean?" Neville asked, stepping forward and taking a seat at the opposite end of the table. Draco remained where he was, not wanting Rabastan to hear his footsteps. "I am here right on time."

"Yes, but you have not been back to the flat I set up for you since our last meeting. Why?"

"Have you been spying on me?" asked Neville in the same cool tone he had used with Mundungus. Draco smirked. He really was masking his fear well.

"Of course I have. You are an important investment of mine and I am not about to let you run loose in a city you are not welcome in. Now, tell me, *where have you been*?" Rabastan repeated in a harsh voice.

Keeping his gaze, Neville leaned back in his chair and said, "I ran into a girl I went to school with the other night, and I have been staying with her." He smiled. "As I recall, these '*terms*' you've laid out for me do not require that I sleep alone every night."

"Hmm, and here I always believed that you were a good, rule abiding wizard," said Rabastan with a sneer. "Very well. If you insist on making this difficult then I must demand that you never see this woman of yours again. Is that clear?"

Neville's smile faded. "Crystal."

"Now, tell me what information you got on the resistance."

With a shrug, Neville said, "Nothing. When they would not give my source information, he used my name. Obviously, it did not go over well. I obliterated his memories of it all, but I doubt they'll be willing to share with him so freely again."

"So your worth to me has dwindled?" asked Rabastan.

"Perhaps," said Neville. "There are other people I can try, but he was the biggest idiot."

Suddenly, Neville's eyes drifted to something in the corner. Draco followed them to see it was a plant with familiar ruffled green leaves. Oh, this was too perfect. There was no way Rabastan could ever be that -

"Why do you have that here?" asked Neville, nodding towards it. "The toxins will sometimes let loose in an enclosed environment, and this room just might be small enough to -"

"It's fine," said Rabastan. "I am transporting it somewhere and thought it would feel less threatened outside of the bag."

"Transporting it?" repeated Neville. "You should have removed the toxins and used them already. It looks like it's been ready to strike for days now."

Rabastan raised his eyebrows. "I thought you were going to charm it to remain frozen in the stage it was in when you received it? If that changed or you were unable to do so then you should have -"

"N-no," said Neville, turning red as he realized his mistake. "N-nothing changed."

Draco winced. *Shit.*

Rabastan continued to stare at him curiously for a moment before his eyes narrowed. "You're hiding something from me. Tell me what it is."

Neville said nothing.

"*Tell me*!"

Well, this charade was over. Knowing that, Neville pulled out his wand, aimed it at the plant and blasted it to oblivion.

"FUCK!" shouted Rabastan, jumping out of his chair with such force that it fell backwards. He lifted his own wand and shot several curses at Neville. He blocked a few, but eventually was thrown up against the wall. Rabastan marched up to

him, pointed his wand at his head and started to shout, "*Legili -*"

But before he could finish, Draco had aimed his wand at Neville and silently cast his spell. *Obstupefio.* A jet of green light shot across the room and hit him in the heart. His head slumped over, but it was not until Rabastan lost focus while glancing frantically around the room that he fell to a lifeless heap on the floor.

"Who's there?" shouted Rabastan.

With another wave of his wand, Draco had him pinned against the wall with the same claw-like hands he had used on Mundungus.

"Must you always make things so difficult, Rabastan?" asked Draco while pulling off his invisibility cloak and putting it into his bag.

Rabastan's eyes narrowed. "*Malfoy*. What are you doing here?"

"Trying to find out more about your plot against me." Draco looked at the plant and smirked. "But that does not seem to be a problem now." Looking back at Rabastan, he noticed the unfamiliar wand in his hand. "Is that from Fenrir's collection?" He lifted his and smiled. "Mine too." Then Draco took Rabastan's wand and snapped it in two. "Whoops."

"I can just get another one you fucking little -"

"Yes, I'm aware," said Draco, going over to Neville. He took off his cloak and put it on himself before transfiguring his body into an empty butterbeer bottle. Then he picked it up and put it in his pocket. "Which is why I am keeping this. If you keep this up, Rabby, I will not hesitate to let the Dark Lord know how you had a key member of the resistance under your thumb for all of this time. I am sure he would *love* to hear all about it." Then Draco took the Longbottom family crest out of his pocket and tossed it onto the table. "Stop messing with me, Rabastan. You should know by now that you will never win."

Draco smirked one last time before pulling on his hood and leaving Rabastan to fend for himself.

Draco hurried home, since he only had twenty minutes before Neville would start to regain consciousness, and he really did not want him to do that while in the form of a butterbeer bottle.

When he got back to his building, he put the bottle down on the floor in the entryway and quickly removed the spell. Not even a minute later, Neville was

popping up, eyes wide as he gasped for air.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy! When I saw that green light I thought you killed me!"

"Yes, that *is* the point of the spell," said Draco.

"I … I've seen that spell before," said Neville, looking down at his hands. "Several times over the years. After some of our battles with the Death Eaters, we would get ready to bury our dead and, by some miracle, every once in a while someone would just wake up. Like it was nothing. That …" He gulped. "That was you?"

Draco shrugged. "Probably. A few other Death Eaters know the spell, but I doubt they use it like I do."

"So … you really have been helping us. For all these years. Since the beginning?"

"No," said Draco.

"Then when?"

He shrugged again. "There wasn't exactly a defining moment. I saw an opportunity to save someone once and I took it. Then I kept taking it whenever I could." Draco paused and took a deep breath. "What was the plant, Longbottom?" he asked, holding out his hand to Neville, who looked at it reluctantly. It took a moment, but he eventually let Draco help him to his feet.

"It's called the Exitialis Colletis. When its toxins are inhaled, it causes anyone who breaths them in to confess a lifetime of secrets, even erased ones, all while dying a slow and painful death. The more secrets you have, the longer and more painful it becomes."

Draco cringed. He had a feeling his death would have been particularly long. "And why does a plant like that even exist?"

"It was illegally bred by a dark wizard in the eighteenth century," said Neville. "Obviously, it's forbidden. I'm not even sure where I could have gotten one."

Draco nodded and headed up the stairs with Neville at his heels. When they got to the third floor, the two of them came face to face with Theo and Hermione, who were sitting in the stairs, Theo staring intently at Bronson's door while Hermione rubbed his back. Draco could already feel his fists clenching.

But then Hermione's eyes lit up. She stumbled down the stairs and into his arms, instantly causing him to forget any doubt he had just felt. Then she was out of his

arms and hugging Neville. The doubt immediately returned.

"Thank Merlin you're both all right! So then everything went according to plan?" she asked, looking hopefully at Draco.

"Actually, nothing did," he answered. "Neville has been exposed by the resistance to his source, and then, when things went sour, I had to expose myself to Rabastan and pretend to kill him."

"So … you found out nothing?"

"No," said Draco. "But the plant is destroyed, so I suppose we can call this a win." He looked at Neville and winked. He smiled nervously back at him. "So why are you both sitting out here?"

"Oh," said Hermione, suddenly blushing. She looked at Theo out of the corner of her eye. "Uhh …"

Just then, they all heard humming and turned towards it. Quigley was heading up the stairs. He jumped a little when he saw all of them standing there. "Umm … hi, guys," he said. "What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Hermione squealed.

"All right then." He went over to his front door and slipped in the key. Then he turned back to see them all staring at him. "Did you want to come in or something?"

They all started to say, "No," but then Theo pushed forward and said, "I will."

Hermione grabbed his arm but he pulled away and went over to Quigley, who was just opening the door.

"Go with him, Draco," Hermione whispered harshly into his ear.

"What? Why -?"

"Just go!" she snapped, pushing him forward.

Draco ran over to the door, just in time to enter with Quigley and Theo, and to see Bronson pulling away from some guy on the sofa, his lips still pink from the obviously snogging he had just been doing.

"Quigs, you're home early," he said while staring at his flatmate, who was

completely unfazed by the sight in front of him. Then his eyes moved to Theo and Draco. Theo stared at him straight on, but Draco stared anywhere else. "And you brought guests. Fan-fucking-tastic."

"Sorry, I didn't know you had company," said Quigley, going over to the table and putting his stuff down. He glanced sideways at Bronson and smirked. It seemed that he knew exactly what he had done.

"Aren't you going to introduce us to your *friend,* Bronson?" asked Theo, the scorn in his voice all too obvious.

"Bloody fucking hell," Draco muttered to himself.

"All right," said Bronson. "Warren, you already know Zander from work."

Draco had to laugh. Personally, he had never understood why Quigley chose to go by his surname when it was so much more ridiculous sounding than his actual one.

"And this is Theo and Draco. The Death Eaters who live upstairs."

"Hello," said Warren almost shyly. He seemed to recognize that something was amiss here. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," said Theo, walking over and taking a seat on the sofa right between them.

"Oh, this is beautiful," Quigley whispered into Draco's ear as they watched from the sidelines.

"So how long have you worked at the restaurant, *Warren*?"

"Umm … just over six months," he said in a crackly voice.

"And did you know you liked Bronson here right away?" asked Theo, putting a hand on Bronson's shoulder.

Bronson twitched and muttered, "Un-fucking-believable," under his breath.

"Uh … well, yes. I suppose I did. But I only found out he was gay maybe two months ago."

"Really?" said Theo, raising his eyebrows. "I knew the moment I met him, mainly because he couldn't stop eye-fucking me. Is that how you found out, *Warren*?

Because you could feel him staring at you? Imagining what it would be like to fuck you?"

Warren blushed. "Why … do you keep saying my name like that?"

Theo cocked his head. "Like what, *Warren*?"

Draco and Quigley chuckled, but when Bronson gave them both a sharp look they shut their mouths quickly.

"Why do you look so nervous, *Warren*? Do you not like being this close to a Death Eater?"

Warren shuddered. "N-no. It's … it's fine."

"Is that right? Would you like to see my Dark Mark then?" said Theo, already pulling up his sleeve. "You can touch it if you want to." He grabbed Warren's hand and put it on his tattoo. "Rough, isn't it? And then with just one touch from my wand -"

"Theo, that's enough!" shouted Bronson from beside him.

Theo turned and looked at him. He shrugged innocently. "What?"

"You *know* what?"

Theo smirked. "Well, forgive me for being curious about what pussy piece of shit you brought home. One look at my bloody mark and I'm pretty sure I just scared him out of his fucking granny's knickers."

Warren looked away and blushed.

"Well, at least he knows what he fucking wants!" shouted Bronson, jumping to his feet.

"And who says I don't?" shouted Theo, doing the same.

"Oh, I'm sorry, is the jealous prick in front of me now not the same person who I saw just after he fucked some girl in his bed less than a week ago? The same fucking bed he wouldn't even let *me* sleep in when I got stuck up there after bloody curfew two nights before!"

Theo turned bright red. "I didn't fucking mean to do that, all right? I was drunk and -"

Bronson laughed. "You're always fucking drunk, Theo! You were drunk the first time you let me suck your cock! And slightly drunk the second!"

Draco quickly turned away. Oh Merlin, he did not want to be here right now.

"That excuse only holds valid for so long!"

Theo looked down, taking several deep breaths as he clenched and unclenched his fists. He looked up, stared Bronson straight in the eye and said, "Well, I'm not drunk right now."

And then he was walking confidently towards his bedroom. Bronson stared after him, his mouth agape as he suddenly appeared very nervous.

"Are you fucking coming?" shouted Theo, who was now out of view.

Bronson glanced sideways at Warren, and then at his bedroom, and then at Warren again.

"Shit, Bronson, we *all* know what you want to fucking do," said Quigley, leaning against the wall. "I'm tired. Can you please just go into the bloody bedroom already and do what you've been whining about for over a month now?"

Bronson glanced at Quigley then, and then at Warren again, and then at the door …

Theo reappeared in the doorway. "Seriously, Bronson, I'm not going to fucking wait in here forever." He disappeared again.

Bronson looked at Warren one last time, cleared his throat, and muttered, "Sorry." Then he was off towards the bedroom, making sure to slam the door behind him.

"Don't forget to put up a Silencing Charm!" Quigley called before going into the kitchen to grab a snack.

And then it was just Draco and Warren.

"Well … this is awkward," said Draco, unsure of what else they were supposed to talk about. The clock chimed and they both looked at it. "Only a half hour till curfew. You might want to …"

Draco motioned towards the door. Warren stared at it for a moment before jumping up, putting on his cloak and darting out of it. Less than thirty seconds later, the door opened again and Hermione came in.

"What happened?" she asked, looking at Draco. "Where's Theo?"

Quigley laughed from the kitchen. Hermione followed Draco's eyes towards the closed bedroom door. Her jaw dropped.

"*No*!"

"Yes," said Quigley, walking out with a sandwich and taking a big bite. "I'm a little shocked myself. I really thought Theo was never going to bloody cave." He laughed again.

"Let's just go," said Draco, taking Hermione's hand and pulling her out of the flat.

Neville was still waiting for them on the staircase. "Everything all right?" he asked.

Draco smiled. "Well, it appears to be your lucky night, Longbottom. *You* get a bed to sleep in."

"Where's Nott?" he asked.

Draco shuddered, causing Hermione to giggle beside him. "We'll tell you when you're older," said Draco before leading them both upstairs. It sure had been a long fucking night.

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"Why do you keep smiling like that, Draco?"

"Hmm?" Draco looked up to see Goyle staring at him as they stood in Voldemort's drawing room. He quickly sucked his smile back. "No reason."

The truth, though, was that he could not stop thinking about last night. It had been New Year's Eve and they had all gone to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, mainly to drop Neville off since Draco's flat was getting a bit crowded, especially now that Bronson stayed over almost every night. Theo swore that they were not shagging. They were going to that one night, but Bronson had stopped them before it got too far. He knew that Theo was not ready to take that step, and he was not going to push him. Draco did not bother to ask what it was they *were* doing every night then, because he really had no interest in the answer.

But last night … He could not help but smile again. The curfew had been raised an hour for the evening, so they all ended up drinking quite a few bottles of champagne until midnight. Hermione had gotten a bit drunk, and it seemed that champagne made her a bit frisky. The moment they got home, she pulled Draco

into the bedroom and proceeded to give him one of their greatest shags to date. Granted, she was hung-over and miserable that morning, but, dammit, it was worth it!

"You're smiling again."

Draco's eyes focused again and he looked at Goyle.

"Could you stop it? It's creeping me out."

Draco's smile immediately fell. There it was again. Creepy …

"If you shagged as bloody loud as he did last night then you might be smiling too," said Theo, who was looking a bit hung-over himself. "Seriously, mate, you've never made the fucking walls rattle before. While I don't normally care, a Silencing Charm became bloody necessary."

"Sorry," said Draco, smiling once more. "Forgot you were there again."

Theo rolled his eyes. "Sure you did."

"Who you shagging, Draco?" asked Goyle.

"Just some slag I met last night," he answered. "Who I will definitely be shagging again tonight." And he was pretty sure he still had some champagne somewhere …

"Hi, Theo."

They all turned to see Astoria standing behind them.

Theo blushed. "Hi."

"How was your New Year's?" she asked.

"Fine," he said before glancing sideways. He spotted Pansy standing by herself and hurried over to her.

Goyle looked confused, but Draco had to try really hard to fight off a smile.

"Did I do something wrong?" Astoria asked, looking sadly at Draco.

And the smile formed. Poor girl. If she only knew. "He just doesn't want you to get the wrong impression," he lied.

Astoria rolled her eyes. "Please. I was fully aware of what he was like before I followed him home that night."

A light finally triggered in Goyle's head. Draco had just figured he knew since he was there that night. And they *had* disappeared at the same time. Sometimes he really was an idiot.

"Then why do you look so upset?" he asked.

Astoria blushed and cast her eyes to the floor. But, before she could say anything, Lord Voldemort entered the room with Bellatrix just behind him. He glanced around the room with his snake-like eyes until he located Draco. Then he beckoned him with his fingers.

Draco stepped forward and stood beside Bellatrix.

"Are we all ready?"

"Yes, my lord," everyone answered.

Voldemort turned in a swift motion, his feet not even seeming to touch the ground as he headed for the staircase. All of his Death Eaters followed after him.

As they ascended the stairs, Draco could feel his aunt's eyes on him. "Something on your mind, Bellatrix?" he asked.

"You look different," she said after a momentary pause.

Draco turned and cocked and eyebrow. "Do I?"

"Yes. I have noticed for a while now. The change has been gradual but it is there. What is it?" she asked almost accusingly.

"New skin potion," he answered with a smirk. "Leaves me positively glowing."

Bellatrix scoffed. "The rumor is that you have found a woman."

Voldemort glanced back towards Draco, who was quick to scoff right back at his aunt. "Yes, I am sure Rabastan has been spreading all sorts of rumors about me. I assure you, nothing has changed, Auntie dearest." He winked.

When Voldemort reached the roof, Bellatrix moved forward but Draco stepped ahead of her and held the door open for him. She sneered at him while he continued to smile.

Then several of the lesser Death Eaters hurried ahead of them, running to the other side of the roof, where they checked on the extension that had been placed on it so that their lord could step out over his citizens of London. It seemed to be ready.

The other Death Eaters all stood along the sides of it while Voldemort stepped forward with Bellatrix and Draco always just behind him. Even from back here, they could hear the roaring crowd anticipating their arrival. When it finally came into view, Draco could see that it was not as large as in previous years, since people were not allowed into the city, even for this.

Several giant two-way mirrors faced them so Voldemort's followers in other cities could view him in all of his glory. Paris, Moscow, Rome and New York were just a few among the ruined civilizations, but they were some of his greatest victories. He visited each one monthly, making sure everything was still running smoothly under his control. He had trusted Death Eaters stationed in all of them, keeping the citizens in line.

As the other Death Eaters came up behind them, Draco began scanning the crowd.

Once everyone was in place, Voldemort lifted his arms. Silence was almost instantaneous, giving Draco that uneasy feeling he hated so much. No bustling city should ever be this quiet.

Voldemort lifted his wand, the Elder Wand, and cast a spell on his vocal chords to make them project. Then he started to speak.

"Today is a sacred day for all of us, for it is the day that marks another year. Another year where we are in power. Four years since we first took this great city from the wretched creatures who dared to believe that they were the ones to create it. Bellatrix."

Voldemort turned his body slightly to look at her. She smiled before walking across a stone pathway that led to a platform where a dozen Muggles were standing on gallows. Bellatrix stopped beside it and waited.

"You have all been judged," continued Lord Voldemort, "and every last one of you will no longer be allowed to taint the world with your dirty blood."

He nodded and Bellatrix waved her wand, causing the floor to collapse beneath the Muggles and leaving every last one of them kicking as they tried to fight for their lives. With another wave, they went out flying over the crowd, their bodies

become still as they continued to hang there, a warning for anyone who dared to try and defy the Dark Lord.

Voldemort smiled at the sight, but then his ears went on full alert and his eyes landed on someone in the crowd. "You there." He lifted his hand and someone came flying towards him, not stopping until their throat was held in his hand. "Is that a whimper I just heard escape from your lips?"

"N-no, my lord," said a young girl who looked terrified out of her mind. And rightfully so.

"Oh, but I believe it was." He released her throat and let her collapse to the floor. "Draco."

Draco went to attention.

"You know what to do."

He nodded. "Yes, my lord."

Draco took out his wand and waved it at the girl, causing her to levitate. He brought her out to the center of the crowd, holding back all of the pain he was feeling. He knew *she* was watching, and he hated that she had to see him do this, but there was no other choice.

With a slice of his wand, the girl was decapitated, her and her lifeless, horrorstruck head forced to float over everyone with the Muggles.

And then he spotted *her*. Towards the back of the crowd, disguised with her foreign face, Hermione stood between Bronson and Oliver, Neville, Cho, and Quigley all staying close. He still did not know how she ever got him to agree to her coming here. It was right around the time the champagne hit her, so he assumed her frisky behavior had something to do with it. Still, he hated this. What if that had been her who had whimpered?

"You all right?" asked Bronson, putting his hand on Hermione's back.

"Yes, I'm fine," she answered. "It … It had to be done. She was as good as dead, right?" Hermione looked at him hopefully.

Bronson smiled halfheartedly. "Yes. He didn't have a choice."

She nodded and looked back at Draco, keeping her eyes on him while she listened to Voldemort speak.

"Quigley, stop looking," she heard Bronson say beside her. "She's not one of them."

"Just making sure," said Quigley, his jaw tightening. The Muggle sacrifice was the only thing that brought him here today. Just in case one of them might have been his sister.

"… and we will not stop, *will not* have won until every last Muggle has perished! The world *will* be ours. Last year, all of Europe became ours, this year we will take the last of Asia and more!"

"Can you believe him?" Cho whispered into Hermione's ear. "He truly believes everything he does is for the greater good."

Hermione nodded. "You have to wonder why it is he believes he is owed so much."

"He's just mental," Cho said simply. "I doubt it delves much deeper than that."

Hermione glanced around the crowd to make sure no one was listening to them. Luckily, everyone was too engulfed in Voldemort to be even slightly aware of their surroundings. And then she caught sight of something. A bright-white light running around people's feet. She squinted her eyes and ducked down a bit to get a better look. She could not believe that no one else noticed it, but one look at their hypnotic expressions and she understood why.

Moving closer, Hermione could finally make it out. It was a dog. A bright-white, translucent Jack Russell terrier. She froze, her heart slowing as the dog moved further into the crowd. And, before she knew what was happening, she was following it. Several other bright-white animals were also wandering around but Hermione only cared about one.

Someone called her fake name behind her but she did not care. She could not lose sight of that dog. And then it stopped by someone's feet. They reached down and gave it a small push.

"Go," they whispered.

Hermione's eyes drifted up. The frame was slightly bulkier than she remembered but it was the same, standing while leaning onto his right leg, arms crossed as he stared up at Voldemort with disdain, and bright-red hair, hidden underneath a hood but a few strands poking out looking as vibrant as ever. Hermione could not breath as she stared at this familiar, freckly face, her eyes beginning to tear and her heart

feeling heavier than ever before but, at the same time, like an incredible weight had been lifted off of it. *Ron.*

And then he was moving, walking out and away from the crowd, headed towards an alley. Hermione followed after him.

Ron stopped near the edge of the crowd and looked to the left of where Voldemort was still speaking. There was a loud screeching noise and Hermione followed his eyes, noticing several figures on brooms flying towards them with Dementors on their tails. He lifted his wand and the Jack Russel, along with several other Patronuses, rose into the sky and hurried towards the Dementors, weeding them off of the broom-riding witches and wizards who were heading straight towards Voldemort.

And then there was a loud bang. Everyone screamed and ducked, Hermione looking up for a brief moment to see that the walkway connecting Voldemort and his Death Eaters' platform to the roof had been destroyed. Draco's eyes were still steadily fixed on her.

Hermione turned back around and spotted Ron leaving the crowd while everything became chaos. She ran after him.

Up on the platform, Draco could see that Hermione was nowhere near the others. How had she gotten so far? She had seemed to be following something but he could not for the life of him see what it was.

"Theo!" he shouted. Theo ran to his side. "Get down there!"

Theo nodded. Just as the resistance members on brooms reached them, he jumped off of the platform and grabbed onto one of them. Out of panic, the witch flying it began to lower her broom, eventually getting close enough that Theo was able to jump off and run into the crowd.

"Flint, Yaxley, Macnair, Nott, get down there with him!" ordered Draco. "Rabastan, Goyles, Parkinsons, Rowle, get down, get your brooms and begin an aerial attack! Everyone else disperse to where you are needed!"

Everyone nodded and took off, some levitating down to the ground, some trying the same tactic as Theo (though less smoothly), and others working together to make a quick staircase.

"Are you all right, my lord?" asked Draco, turning towards Voldemort.

His face was stiff as he stared into the panicked crowd, his red eyes flaring

through even narrower slits than usual. "How dare they," he said in a voice that sent chills down Draco's spine. "How dare they interrupt my speech. What are they after?"

"I do not know, my -"

Just then, a broom swooped by, one hand dangling off of it as the rider tried to grab Draco by the robe. He ducked out of reach just in time, looking up to meet the angry eyes of George Weasley.

"Get him, Angelina!"

Another broom swooped overhead and grabbed for him. Voldemort grabbed its tail and sent the person hurdling.

Draco stood back up and looked into Voldemort's outraged eyes. "My lord, I do not know -"

Another one came for him, and he used his wand to set fire to the bristles. *Shit.*

Back out in the crowd, Hermione was still chasing after Ron, but he was having much more success getting through the chaos than she was.

"Ron!"

She kept screaming his name but Ron did not hear her, continuing to march on. He appeared to be heading for an alley between two tall buildings. Hermione knew he was trying to leave. But why?

"No," Hermione said quietly as he got through the thickest part of the crowd. "No!"

She broke into a run, pushing and shoving and knocking people over, doing everything she could to break through the bloody crowd.

"Ron!"

He was getting further from her, his legs moving like he was in a great hurry.

"Ron!"

He had almost reached the alley.

"*RON*!"

Ron froze. Hermione kept pushing, not stopping until she was through the worst of

it. She sighed in relief. He knew it. He still knew her voice.

Ron turned and began looking around frantically, his eyes darting everywhere as he searched for the owner of the voice he knew so well.

Then they fell upon her.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. The tears that had already formed spilled over. Hers and Ron's eyes met. She waved her wand to return them to amber. But there was no need. Even through her disguise he saw her, because he knew her.

His mouth moved in the shape of her name but she could not hear him through the chaos.

Hermione gave him one soft nod. Ron took several skeptical steps forward. He kept glancing back at the alley. It was obvious there was somewhere he needed to be, but, still, he moved towards her.

"Hermione!"

Hermione heard him this time. She began to step forward but Ron stopped suddenly and held out his hands.

"No! Hermione, look out!"

A string of blasts went off all around her, sending Hermione flying into the air. They were not damaging in any way and were not designed to kill. Only distract. Still, she fell hard onto the ground, her eyes hazy as her head shot back up. Everything was spinning, but she refused to let this consume her. She could not lose sight of him. Not now.

"Hermione!" screamed a faint voice in the distance.

Whether it was Ron's or someone else's, she did not know. Her mind was still too muddled to process it. Her ears were ringing as she slowly got to her knees.

"Hermione!" the voice called again. She put her hand on her head to try and focus it.

"Hermione?" repeated another voice from just beside her. A terribly hoarse voice that should not have been able to work at all without the assistance of a wand.

Hermione's heart stopped. She slowly began to turn, her eyes widening with fear as they fell upon the familiar face of Rodolphus Lestrange. He was gazing back at

her, also on the ground and squinting as he tried to get a good look at her,

The moment he recognized her inside of her altered face was all too evident. It was the eyes. The amber eyes she had changed back for Ron.

Hermione gulped. She began to scramble to her feet. As she moved away from him, Rodolphus's face became angry. He stood up and lunged for her, his fingertips grazing her wrist. But, before he could clutch on, someone knocked him from behind and he fell over.

"Shit, Roddy! Th'fuck you getting in my way for?" shouted Theo, jerking his head at Hermione so she would be reminded to bloody move.

"Fucking, Nott! That was *her*! Get out of my fucking way!"

As Hermione turned to run, someone grabbed her from behind. She turned quickly to see Bronson's face hidden underneath his hood.

"Let's go!" he shouted.

"But -"

"No buts, Hermione! We have to go *now*!"

Hermione turned back and scanned the crowd one last time. As Bronson pulled her away, she finally caught sight of Ron's face. He was still searching for her. His eyes finally found hers and he tried to push to get there, but the crowd was just too thick.

"I'll find you!" Hermione heard him call faintly over the roar of people. "I'll find you, Hermione! I'll find you!"

Hermione nodded, crying hysterically as his blue eyes faded into the distance. Bronson was pulling her and he was not stopping.

"Where's Draco?" she asked.

"Still on the platform," he answered. "He's their fucking target!"

Hermione gasped and looked up at the platform. Draco and Bellatrix were fighting off the people on brooms. Voldemort was flying through them, shooting Killing Curses at anyone who had the misfortune of crossing his path. Several Death Eaters had made it onto their own brooms and were doing the same.

"He'll be fine, Hermione!" shouted Bronson, tugging on her arm. "Quigley and the others are waiting for us! *Let's go*!"

Hermione nodded. She had to force herself to tear her eyes away from Draco, knowing very well the reason why they were coming for him. It was because of her, and what he had told Ron when he had seen him. That he knew where she was.

Hermione and Bronson finally reached the others, who were waiting for them. Oliver and Cho had tried to reach some of the resistance members to tell them to pull back, but with no luck. Everything was too chaotic.

With one last look at Draco, Hermione let out a whimper before following the others out of there. This was her fault. Any death that took place throughout all of this was on her hands.

Draco ducked as another broom flew at him. "There just seems to be fucking more and more of them!" he shouted at Bellatrix.

"What do they want with you?" she asked accusingly.

"Fuck if I know!"

Right at that moment, George and Angelina pulled out of the crowd of brooms, each reaching down and grabbing one of his shoulders, pulling him high into the air.

"Get the fuck off me!" he shouted, successfully pushing Angelina off but having to grab onto George's broom so he would not fall.

"Where's Hermione?" George demanded as he flew him further over the crowd.

"Seriously?" shouted Draco. "Where's your fucking brother because I'm going to kick his bloody arse for this?"

"Where is she?" shouted Angelina, who had suddenly reappeared.

"Safe!" was all Draco said. "Or she fucking was! Who knows after everything you just fucking did!"

Draco let go of the broom and tried to levitate himself as he went plummeting towards the ground but, before he could, Angelina had him again, keeping a firm grip as she carried him towards an alley with George knocking anyone flying after them off of their brooms.

Angelina dropped him into the alley, and she and George landed smoothly. "Where is he?" asked Angelina as George bound Draco's wrists and ankles. "He should be here."

"I don't know," he said, looking all around.

"But we need to move before someone follows us!"

"Angelina, I know! But we didn't exactly plan for him not being here!"

Draco rolled his eyes and used a nonverbal spell to unbind himself. "Bloody great system you've got here," he said while getting to his feet. "Tell the Weasel that he needs to bloody cool it. I already told him she would be back with him soon enough."

George and Angelina aimed their wands sharply at him.

Draco smiled and held his hands up innocently. "I'm not going to attack."

Just then, someone came running into the alley. They all turned to see Ron heading towards them.

"Where have you been?" shouted George.

"I saw her!" he shouted. "I saw Hermione!"

"Did you?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow. "Let me guess. Dark hair with bangs, blue eyes, pale complexion?"

Ron's eyes widened.

"I told you she was fine you fucking -"

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

The four of them dispersed in different directions as a Killing Curse shot down the alley. Draco looked to see Rodolphus marching towards them.

"My knight in shining armor!" Draco called while getting back to his feet. He stepped in front of them. "The Dark Lord will want them alive."

"Don't get in my fucking way, Malfoy! I'm going to kill this … this little shit! *Avada Kedavra*!"

He was aiming at Ron, who quickly pulled something out of his pocket. He ran

over to George and Angelina, grabbed their hands, and took one last look at Draco before the three of them were sucked away.

"NO!" shouted Rodolphus, falling to his knees.

Draco stared blankly at the spot they had just been. So they were planning to take him with a portkey. Clever.

Pressing his back against the building, Draco used it to lower himself to the ground. A shadow flew overhead and he looked up to see the Dark Lord flying above him. Voldemort slowly began to descend towards him. Draco frowned. Well, this was not going to be good.

# Chapter 23: All You Need Is Love

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"I'm telling you, it was her! It was her! It was her! It was *fucking* her!" Rodolphus shouted at his brother as all of the Death Eaters and Voldemort gathered in his conference room. "And I would have had her if fucking Nott hadn't tripped me!" He turned his accusatory eyes towards Theo.

"It was an accident," Theo spat. "You got in my fucking way while I was trying to get to the bloody Weasel."

"So you both had two of Potter's closest allies in your grasp and failed," said Voldemort. It was not a question. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply, a sight that had everyone on edge. "You have disappointed me today. *All* of you." His eyes shot back open, landing right on Draco. "And *you*. You were their target."

Draco kept his gaze, took a deep breath and said, "It seems that way, my lord."

"Why?"

"They were asking me about the location of Hermione Granger."

"But why *you*? Would not any Death Eater suffice?"

Draco took another deep breath. "During our mission to Godric's Hollow earlier this month, you might recall that I had an encounter with Ron Weasley. I may have implied to him that I knew where she was."

Voldemort's snake-like nostrils began to flare. Merlin, it was a disgusting and frightening sight. "And *what* reasoning would you have for doing that?"

"We are out a prisoner, my lord," said Draco. "We have no one in our possession to hold over Potter anymore. I thought if he believed I had her then he might agree to an exchange. His life for hers. But he claimed to not believe me, and then Carrow showed up and fucked the whole thing -"

"He's lying!" shouted Rodolphus, pointing at him accusingly. "My lord, surely you can see that he is lying! He was speaking too calmly with the resistance when I arrived! Something is wrong with -"

"You *dare* call me a liar?" Draco said threateningly. He lunged forward and stood up straight so he was glaring right into Rodolphus's eyes. "You and your brother have been getting on my last fucking nerve, Roddy! If you spent half the energy you use fucking with me on serving the Dark Lord then maybe it would not have been so easy for me to take your fucking seat!"

"Draco, you are already on thin ice," said Lucius, stepping forward and grabbing his son's arm. "Maybe it is time for you to just back off and -"

"No!" shouted Draco. "No, I will *not* back off, Father! I will *not* give in! I have been nothing but loyal to the Dark Lord for years, while this prick plans to run away with a fucking Mudblood the first chance he gets!"

All color drained from Rodolphus's face as his brother moved to his side.

"How *dare* you," spat Rabastan. "My brother would *never* run away with a filthy Mudblood. He has already agreed that her execution is eminent."

"Really?" Draco scoffed as he raised his eyebrows. "Is that why I saw him buying two bloody cases of Amortentia in the Black Market a few weeks ago?"

Rodolphus's face tensed as he slowly began to shake his head. "You fucking little -"

"If this is true, Draco, then why have you not brought it to my attention sooner?" asked Voldemort, practically floating over to them.

"I am sorry, my lord, but he offered me information on his brother for my silence. He is the one who gave me information on the crests and told me how many there were."

Rabastan looked at his brother in disbelief. He began backing away from him.

"I was going to inform you of his plan the moment we recaptured her," said Draco. While he had not intended to throw Rodolphus under the colony of stampeding giants just yet, it was important for him to direct Voldemort's anger elsewhere. His punishment was unavoidable, but maybe now it would be slightly less severe.

Several silent moments passed that were absolutely deafening. Draco had always prided himself on how well he read people, but Voldemort was the one person he had never been able to figure out. He knew he was angry, that was simple enough, but there were always so many more layers to it. Disappointment? Definitely. But did he feel so horribly betrayed that he would want to shed blood for this?

Just as Draco's mind began to wander, Voldemort lifted his wand, aimed it at one of the lesser Death Eater's - who Draco had never even bothered to learn the name of - and slashed it in the air. A large gash appeared across his throat and he fell to his knees as he immediately began to bleed out.

Draco noticed Astoria move to help him, so he quickly held up his hand to stop her. The Dark Lord had made his decision. This man was doomed to the fate that should have been Draco's, and there was nothing any of them could do about it.

"Bellatrix, take your husband home and locate his Amortentia," said Voldemort, turning to his most trusted servant while this man continued to die on the floor. Once you locate it, the two of you will return here. Neither of you have escaped punishment for your failures today."

"Yes, my lord," said Bellatrix with a nod. She went and took Rodolphus's arm, guiding him out of the room as if he were a prisoner.

"Draco, go and stand in the center of the table," instructed Voldemort as soon as they were gone.

"As you wish, my lord," said Draco, obediently walking over to the table and using a chair to step onto it. He stood in the center and awaited further instructions.

"I am disappointed in you, Draco. You have been keeping secrets from me, not just about your encounter with the resistance, but about Rodolphus as well." Voldemort turned and looked around the room. "Every last one of you will be punished for your failure today. And Draco." His head moved slowly back in his direction. "You will suffer the pain right along with them."

Draco kept a calm face and said, "Yes, my lord." He had to fight the urge to scan the room and count how many Death Eaters were currently stationed here,

because he really had no idea. At least thirty. Probably more. His insides cringed. People had gone insane for less.

"Mr. Nott, step forward."

Quincy began to take a step but Voldemort held up his hand and said, "Not you. The young Nott."

Theo's eyes drifted up to Draco as he stepped out of the crowd. "Am I first, my lord?"

"No, Theodore, today you will be last. Until then, I will need you to cast the Cruciatus Curse on Draco every time I do the same on one of my subordinates."

His eyes still on Draco, Theo took a deep breath and asked, "Why me, my lord?"

"It seems only fitting," answered Voldemort. "Draco deserves punishment, and who better to administer it than his one true ally."

"But -"

"Do not argue, Theo," said Draco, looking down at him from the table. "The Dark Lord has made his decision. I *must* be punished."

Theo bit his cheek and nodded slowly.

"Show no mercy," instructed Voldemort from beside him. "Rabastan, you will have the privilege of going first."

"Yes, my lord." Rabastan stepped onto the table and stood next to Draco. They glanced sideways at each other, Rabastan not even trying to hide his joy from this outcome.

"Ready, Theodore?"

"Yes, my lord."

Voldemort and Theo each raised their wands, pointed them at their respective targets and shouted, "*Crucio*!"

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"Where are they?"

Hermione paced around the room frantically, her watery and swollen eyes never

leaving the fireplace as she tried to use them to magically urge Draco and Theo to appear.

"Hermione, please just take a seat and calm down," encouraged Bronson from the sofa. "Draco and Theo will be fine. They -"

"No!" shouted Hermione. "No, I will *not* calm down! This is my fault! They were after Draco because of me, and You-Know-Who will be angry. He'll be so … so angry." She began to sob, stopping her pacing for a moment to steady herself while her body shook uncontrollably.

Quigley walked out of her and Draco's bedroom with her radio in his hands. He turned it on and put it on the coffee table so that all of them could listen. It was just static.

"If you're worried about You-Know-Who killing him for this, you really don't have to be," said Bronson. "Draco is his favorite. He would never -"

"There are things far worse than death, Bronson," Hermione said weakly. "While Draco may be strong, there is only so much one person can take."

Suddenly, the static on the radio became smoother, and then someone was speaking. "*Attention resistance members worldwide*," said the familiar voice of Dean Thomas."*Today, the first of January, we administered an aerial attack on the city of London during You-Know-Who's infamous New Year's speech. While we were unable to retrieve what we went for, we ended up with something much greater. Hermione Granger has escaped. She was seen inside the city walls and in perfect health. That being said, we would like to take this time to offer a reward of one-thousand Galleons to anyone with information leading to the return of -*"

Before he could finish speaking, Hermione marched over, picked up the radio and threw it hard against the wall. Her face was red and her breathing erratic as she stared hypnotically at the remains on the floor. Her fists were clenched so tight that her nails burrowed into her skin, drawing blood that began to trickle down her fingers.

Bronson sighed and stood up. He went over to her, rubbing her hands until they relaxed. While she cried, he opened her palms and waved his wand to heal the wounds. "Who saw you?" he asked while he worked.

"Ron," she answered in a strained voice. "I saw his Patronus and I followed it to him. I wasn't able to reach him, but I … I saw him." Hermione paused. "Draco was right. He does look angrier." She laughed through her tears, but it was not long

before her smile faded and she was thinking of Draco once more. "When I saw him I was so happy, but …" She closed her eyes and whimpered. "… but now all I can think about is the price Draco will have to pay for Ron's actions. I can't lose him, Bronson. He's … he's everything to me."

"I know," said Bronson, releasing her healed hands and using his thumbs to wipe away her tears. "You're not going to lose him, Hermione. Please, just sit down and we'll wait for him. All right?"

Hermione nodded. Bronson took her by the hand and pulled her towards the sofa. Quigley had picked up the remains of the radio and was currently trying to fix it. He glanced sideways at her and smirked. "Happy New Year, right?"

Hermione chuckled halfheartedly. "Seriously."

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*Hermione*.

Draco closed his eyes and let her image take hold of him. It was the only way he was able to endure the pain. He clenched his teeth so tightly together that he almost thought he would crack them, but it was the only way to keep her name from slipping out of his lips.

If it were not for her then he would have given up already. Which was exactly what the Dark Lord was trying to make him do. To see if he was breakable.

"*Crucio*!"

Draco tried to hold in his screams, but the faint sound of someone in agonizing pain kept ringing in his ears. It must have been his cries, but he was dead to them now. *Twenty-four*. That was how many times he had been hit with the Cruciatus Curse so far, and through the hazy fog in his eyes, he could make out at least ten unrecognizable figures still waiting for their punishment.

The screams stopped.

"On your feet, Draco," he heard the muffled voice of the Dark Lord say.

Draco turned his aching body, his shaky arms nearly giving out on him as he tried to push himself to his feet. About halfway up, his knees buckled and Draco collapsed. His throat stung as he began to cough, blood spurting out of his mouth and onto the table beneath him.

"My lord, please, he has suffered enough," said the familiar voice of his father as one of the blurry figures stepped forward. "I will take on the rest of his punishment. You may even double it if that is what you -"

"NO!" shouted Draco as he whipped his head in the direction he was fairly certain his father was in. "No, you will *not* take my punishment away from me! This was *my* failure, I deserve this!"

*Hermione.*

Closing his eyes, Draco envisioned her face once more, giving him strength to pull himself to his feet. He stood on shaky legs while the next Death Eater stepped onto the table.

"Draco, you don't have to do this," said Lucius in a strained voice.

"Yes I do, Father." He opened his eyes again and looked at Voldemort. "I'm ready."

Voldemort smiled back at him wickedly. "You heard him, Theodore. Please continue."

Draco and Theo locked eyes, Theo's beginning to water as he unsteadily lifted his wand. He gulped. "*Crucio*!"

Draco clenched his eyes, his teeth, his fists, his entire body as he tried to hold himself together. He could do this. He could fight the pain. During his first years as a Death Eater, he had trained himself to become numb to it. The only reason he felt it now was because of the extremeness of it all. He had never been hit with the Cruciatus Curse this many times before.

Draco closed his eyes.

*Hermione.*

And then he saw her again. Only, this time, she was different. Looking at him and smiling happily as they stood in the center of the bustling streets of Diagon Alley. He looked down at their clasped hands, noticing the amber ring sparkling in the sun on her left ring finger. Theo was there, laughing with Bronson and Quigley while the latter had his arm linked with a girl who greatly resembled him. His sister. Or Draco's version of her. Andromeda walked up, holding Teddy's hand. She wrapped her arm around Draco and hugged him in a way that felt so familiar. It was just like how his mother used to hug him. Even Potter and Weasley were there. For Hermione, not for him.

And Hermione … She was right there, always looking up at him in a way that made his heart feel light. Like nothing could ever hurt him, ever touch him. She lifted her free hand and stroked his cheek. "I love you, Draco."

"I love you too, Hermione."

And then she was leaning up, standing on tiptoe to kiss him in front of everyone. This was what Draco wanted. A future. With her. In a world where they had won, and they could be together without having to hide. He loved her. Merlin, he loved her so much that it hurt. But it was a pain he could endure. A beautiful pain that he could never get enough of it.

This pain consumed him, taking him over and bringing him to a blissful state of unawareness. A euphoria where there was nothing but this feeling. And then someone was calling his name, sucking him back from this place he had found and never wanted to leave.

Draco opened his eyes and looked to his side to see Theo staring at him. He was standing on the table, bruises marking his body, signifying that he had just taken his own punishment. He looked a lot worse than the others.

"How … m-many times did he curse you?" Draco asked in a shaky voice.

"Three," answered Theo. "For my failure in catching Weasley."

"Th-that's not f-fair."

Somehow, Draco had managed to stay on his feet through the last of it, but, being brought back to this state of consciousness so suddenly, he felt his legs give in and he fell forward. Theo rushed over and caught him before he could hit the table.

Lifting his eyes, Draco could now see that his father was standing where Theo once was. He was obviously the one to curse him these last three times.

Voldemort held his hands behind his back as he continued to gaze up at them. Draco met his eyes, his breathing heavy as he tried to convey that he did not fear him. Which he did not. The only thing Draco feared anymore was losing Hermione, and he would be damned if he died before saving her.

Several silent moments passed while Voldemort and Draco continued to stare at each other. Finally, the Dark Lord moved his eyes to Theo and said, "Theodore, take Draco into the drawing room and lay him down. Everyone else is dismissed." He walked out first.

The Death Eaters all began to vacate the room, Rabastan smiling smugly as he walked by Draco. Pansy and Goyle went over to help Theo lower him from the table. Astoria stood back a little, looking unsure if she should be helping too.

"Astoria!" her father called from the doorway. "Leave him be. This does not concern you."

Astoria turned and stared at him defiantly before going over and helping Pansy steady Draco's left arm while he stepped onto a chair. Once he was there, Goyle grabbed him carefully and lowered him the rest of the way.

"Thanks, Goyle," said Draco, grabbing onto his shoulders as his legs began to cave again.

Theo jumped down and wrapped an arm around Draco's waist. "You should all leave before the Dark Lord says something," he told the others. "I can take him the rest of the way."

Goyle and Pansy looked at each other skeptically, but they both eventually nodded and walked out of the room. Astoria stayed, though, and asked, "Are *you* all right, Theo? The Dark Lord seemed to put more power into his attacks on you. You should not -"

"I'm fine," he interrupted. "Just go."

Astoria looked sadly at him and nodded. "I know you care about your friend, but don't forget to take care of yourself tonight, as well."

She walked out of the room then, and Theo slowly began to drag Draco's stiff body towards the drawing room.

"Did I say anything?" Draco asked quietly while they moved.

"No," answered Theo, already knowing very well what he was talking about. "You were unnervingly quiet throughout most of it."

Draco smirked, showing off the blood coating his teeth. Theo sighed before taking out his wand and waving it at them.

"Was it worth it?" he asked.

Draco attempted a shrug. "I guess we will find that out when we get home."

By the time they got to the drawing room, everyone had left. Theo laid Draco down

on the sofa, making sure to place his head carefully onto a pillow. Mere seconds later, Lucius walked in with a goblet full of a bubbling green liquid.

"Draco … Son," he said, taking a seat by his side. "Drink this."

"But the Dark Lord -"

"Let me deal with him," said Lucius, propping Draco up and pouring the hot liquid down his throat. Draco drank every last drop.

"Lucius, if you are quite finished, I would like a word alone with your son."

Lucius and Theo turned to see Voldemort standing in the doorway.

"Hurry home, young Nott," he said while looking at Theo.

Theo nodded, looking at Draco one last time before going over to the fireplace and Flooing back to Draco's flat.

"My lord," said Lucius, standing up and stepping forward. "I know I was supposed to return to the manor this evening but -"

"Yes, Lucius. You have my permission to stay," said Voldemort while stepping further into the room. "Now, leave us."

Lucius looked back at his son and sighed before leaving the room with the empty goblet in hand.

Voldemort glided over to one of the armchairs and sunk into it. "I will give you a few moments for that potion to set in. Then, I believe it is time you and I have a serious discussion about your future."

"Yes, my lord," said Draco. He closed his eyes and let the potion consume him, the feeling of the hot liquid spreading all throughout his body, easing but not erasing his agonizing pain.

*Hermione.*

More than anything, he wanted to leave here. To go home and check on her. To be with her. She had seen Ron. While she had told Draco she had chosen him, he could not help but wonder if the appearance of her first love might change that. It had been more than four and a half years and, while the world had changed, she was becoming more and more like her old self with each passing day. What was to stop her from wanting her old life? With him? Ron. The simple choice. The better

choice. But Draco's heart could not take it. He loved her too much to lose her.

*Hermione.*

How he longed to say her name out loud. To scream at Voldemort and tell him how much he loved a Mudblood. But he could not do it. Not now. Not before she was safe. And free. Above all else, he wanted her to be free …

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Theo's alarm went off on the fireplace and Hermione shot to her feet. Seconds later, Theo appeared, looking a bit shaky as he stepped out of the flames.

"Theo," said Bronson, also jumping to his feet. "What happened?"

"I'm fine," said Theo, pulling down the sleeves on his robes so they could not see the bulk of his bruises. "The Dark Lord's just a little pissed is all."

"Where's Draco?" asked Hermione, looking expectantly at the fireplace, but his alarm never went off.

"The Dark Lord wanted to speak with him privately. It will probably be a while."

"Is … is he all right?" asked Hermione, a new set of tears already dripping from her eyes.

Theo tried to meet her gaze but eventually had to stare at the floor. "We should probably start preparing a Healing Potion."

Hermione's heart sank as she was suddenly overcome with the incredible urge to vomit. But she fought through it and ran to the kitchen, taking out a cauldron and throwing ingredients into it as quickly as she could. While she set fire underneath the cauldron, she heard soft footsteps come up behind her. Theo.

"What … what did he do to him?" she asked between choked breaths.

"It's not impor -"

"*Tell me,*" she ordered while turning towards him with wide, red eyes.

Theo sighed and said, "Everyone was punished with the Cruciatus Curse. And Draco … he had to endure it right along with them."

Hermione whimpered as her jaw fell open. "So he … he was hit with the Cruciatus

Curse as many times as there are Death Eaters?"

Theo looked ashamedly to the floor and nodded.

"How many?"

Theo looked up again.

"How many times, Theo?"

He sighed again, much deeper this time. "There were thirty-seven Death Eaters there. And I was hit three times for failing to capture Weasley, so … so he was hit thirty-nine times."

Hermione gasped.

"Holy shit," said Bronson from the living room.

"And he's *alive*?" asked Quigley. "Is he conscious?"

"Yes," answered Theo. "He was conscious the entire time."

Hermione turned away and began stirring the potion, her heavy weeping making it hard for her to concentrate. *Thirty-nine* times. In one sitting. She had once seen a girl go insane after being hit with seventeen consecutive curses in a row, and he had endured more than twice that amount.

"Hermione … your tears are going to taint the potion," said Theo, putting a hand on top of hers and taking the ladle. "Let me -"

Hermione fell to her knees, keeping one hand on the counter as she sobbed uncontrollably, her tears falling down her cheeks and soaking the floor. To her surprise, a pair of strong arms suddenly wrapped around her. Through her blurry vision, she could just make out Theo kneeling down beside her. She let herself sink into him, burying her face into his chest as her mind became flooded with visions of Draco, wounded and writhing as he screamed out in pain, trying to appear strong as he fought of unconsciousness. She knew what it was he feared the most. That if he let the pain, let the curse, let Voldemort consume him and he gave in, that he might never wake up. To him death truly was the worst option, because he was not ready for it yet. Not until he had avenged his mother, not until Hermione was safe, not until the world was a place worth living in again. For everyone.

When Hermione opened her eyes again, Theo was carrying her, laying her down

on hers and Draco's bed and pulling up the covers. "Go to sleep," he said, "and, when you wake up, Draco will be here."

Hermione nodded, clutching tightly onto the covers as she tried to let sleep take over. But what if she woke up and he was not there? While Draco's greatest fear may have been death, hers was losing him. She was not ready yet. She loved him. She needed him …

Back in the kitchen, Theo was stirring the potion mindlessly.

"It's already going, you know," said Bronson, coming up beside him. "You can just let it brew."

"I need to keep busy," said Theo, his eyes unblinking. Suddenly, he felt a hand grab onto his and hold the ladle still. He looked up to see Bronson staring at him very seriously.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing," he answered before letting the ladle go and crossing his arms.

"You're hiding something. Is Malfoy worse than you let -?"

"No," Theo said quickly. "No, nothing like that. He's … he's fine, all things considered."

"Then what is it?"

Theo looked off to the side and sighed. "The Dark Lord, he …" He gulped. "He made me do the torturing. On … on Draco. Thirty-six fucking times. And then he made his father take over while I received my punishment. I just … I don't like torturing as it is. And when it's … when it's someone who … who fucking matters -"

As Theo spoke, he tried hard to fight off the tears. But, eventually, he could not hold them in any longer and they poured out in two heavy pools, stinging down his cheeks. Bronson lifted his arms and quickly pulled Theo into them, letting him cry it out.

Theo tried to pull away. "I told you before that I'm not much of a toucher."

Bronson kept a firm grip on him and held him in place. "Unfortunately for you, I am. Now, in this moment I am going to continue hugging you and you're *going* to like it."

Theo stopped struggling. "I don't understand you people," he said through his sobs. "You should hate me and Draco for the things we do. We kill people, we inflict suffering, we torture our best friends, and all just so we can survive."

Bronson chuckled. "While you and Malfoy are hardly innocent, it is not like you enjoy the things you are forced to do. You can give in and let You-Know-Who kill you if you want, Theo, but then who would be around to help people when opportunity presents itself? Without you, Hermione would have been captured today. I saw how close that Death Eater was to grabbing her. You saved her."

"Did I?" asked Theo.

"Yes, you did. Malfoy's strong, he'll get through this. And I'm sure he would rather you were the one torturing him than one of those bloody pricks who have it out for him. I doubt you gave it your all."

Theo smiled into his chest. "I didn't."

"There, you see? You *helped*."

Theo gave in and laughed. "You have strange fucking logic."

"But it's still *logical*. So who cares what roundabout way I had to take to get there?"

"Hey, I fixed it!" Quigley suddenly shouted from the living room. "Looks like the resistance is still talking."

Theo pulled away from Bronson. He checked on the brewing potion one last time before walking over to the sofa with him and listening to whatever it was those idiots possibly had to say.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"Has that potion taken affect?"

"Yes," said Draco, carefully pulling himself into a seated position. He really did not feel much better, but he wanted to get whatever this was over with so that he could get home to Hermione. She would be worried about him, and he was worried about her. At least Theo was there with her now.

Draco looked up to see that Voldemort was staring at him, sitting with perfect posture while his snake-eyes were serious and unblinking. Always unblinking, just like the serpent he emulated so much.

"What is it you wanted to speak to me about, my lord?"

"I was just curious as to why you did not let your father take over for you in there." Voldemort's words were not spoken like a question. "You knew I would have let him."

"Yes, my lord, I knew," said Draco. "But it was my punishment and I wanted to endure it on my own. If you did not believe I could handle it then you would not have inflicted it upon me."

"That is an interesting notion," said Voldemort, picking up a glass of brandy from the table beside his armchair and taking a sip. Where it had come from, Draco had no idea. He offered a glass to him, but Draco declined. His mouth ached from clenching his teeth so hard, and he had no interest in swallowing anything down his raw throat.

"Yes, well, four and a half years ago I suffered a similar punishment for my failures during the war. You … you called me weak. And a coward."

"Yes, I recall," said Voldemort, putting his glass back down. Draco found himself watching the movement of his hand, his eyes landing on the emerald ring he wore on his pinky finger. One of the few reminders that the monster in front of him had once been human.

"That day, I swore that I would better myself, make myself strong, so that I would never have to hear those words come from your mouth again. Not while directed towards me."

It was not a lie, but the vow had been more about keeping himself alive than being loyal. He was so young back then, so naïve. He did not understand that the world could be better.

Draco leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees and propping his forehead up with his fingers. "Why am I still here, my lord? Have you asked me to stay because you … because you have decided to demote me? To send me back to a lower seat?" It was much easier to sound torn up by this than he expected, when really it would have been a relief. He was not sure when he started being the Dark Lord's favorite but he had hated it every step of the way. And, worse, he had dragged Theo along with him.

"No, Draco, you will not be losing your seat. Quite the contrary."

Draco's heart stopped as his eyes widened. *No.* "What do you mean, my lord?"

"With your skill in Occlumency, it has not been easy for me to trust you, Draco. And after learning of Severus's betrayal, someone whom I believed to be a loyal servant of mine, I have been skeptical over who I let into my inner circle. Until now, your aunt, Bellatrix, is the only one I have deemed loyal enough to keep my secrets. I have decided it is time I take on another, and *you* are the one I have chosen."

There really were no words for this travesty. But Draco scrambled to come up with some. "I do not understand, my lord," said Draco, trying hard to hide the fear he felt over what this might mean for him. "Why now, when so many of your servants have been working so hard to deem me as a traitor?"

Finally leaning back in his chair, Voldemort looked straight ahead into the fire and said, "I am aware of what jealousy is, Draco, and you have been known to evoke it in many people. Not unlike myself at your age." He paused and breathed in heavily through his snake-like nose. "You have proven yourself tonight by taking your punishment. No traitor would ever endure that much pain for the one they are betraying."

They would if they had a girl they needed to get home to. Draco had learned what Voldemort wanted a long time ago. He knew what he expected from his followers. To never give up until their mission was complete, even if it means losing their life.

Once again, Voldemort's hand went to his glass and Draco's eyes fell back upon the emerald ring. His father had told him the story of it once. How it had belonged to a girl Tom Riddle went to school with. A girlfriend of sorts. But one day, in their sixth year, she had died suddenly, much like everyone else that evoked any sort of emotion in this monster.

"What is it about my hand that intrigues you so?" asked Voldemort, tearing Draco out of his daze.

"Forgive me, my lord. I was just looking at your ring."

"Yes. It is a memento of my past."

"I have heard the story before, my lord," said Draco. "About the girl who once owned it."

"Yes," said Voldemort, still looking into the flames. "I suppose there was a girl. But love makes people weak, Draco. Never forget that. Why, just look at what happened to your poor mother."

Draco could feel his face become hot as he fought hard to keep himself in control. "Are you saying you loved, my lord?" he asked in an attempt to contain himself.

Voldemort chuckled hoarsely. The sound of it was unnerving and continued to ring in Draco's ears even after it ended. "Not I, Draco. *She*. She loved. And now she is dead because of it."

Draco wanted to ask him more about this '*she*' and what had become of her but, before he could, there was a '*swish*' and Bellatrix stepped out of the fireplace carrying two well-sized boxes.

"This is all of it, my lord," she said, tossing the boxes onto the floor. There was a loud sound of glass rattling. "His filthy little Mudblood slave was more than happy to assist me, since my husband was not exactly being forthcoming."

There was another '*swish*' and Rodolphus stepped out of the fireplace looking nervous. And rightfully so.

"Welcome back, Rodolphus," said Voldemort, floating to his feet. "It appears that you have purchased a lifetime supply of this … *love* potion." He stared down at the boxes for a moment before lifting his wand and blasting them to oblivion.

Rodolphus winced as he saw what he had considered his salvation destroyed. Draco could finally feel his smirk return.

"My lord, while I do not condone my husband *or* his actions, he has actually come up with a decent plan to help us capture Potter's Mudblood."

"Oh," said Voldemort, not sounding the least bit intrigued. "And what is that?" He looked to Rodolphus.

"A … a taboo, my lord. On her name."

"A taboo?" repeated Draco while carefully getting to his feet. He wobbled a little but was able to keep himself up. "That is absolutely ridiculous. The only reason the taboo works on the Dark Lord's name is because it is unique."

"Her name is hardly common," retorted Rodolphus. "And we know she is in the city. We would only have to follow leads around here."

"I do not believe I ever knew her name," said Voldemort.

"Hermione," Draco and Rodolphus said together. They both turned and stared daggers at each other.

"My lord, the only reason I recognized her in her disguise today was because I heard someone calling her name. That is how I came up with the idea," explained Rodolphus.

"And if the resistance really is planning her rescue then they should be shooting it out right and left," added Bellatrix. "If it does not help us recapture her, then it could at least help us capture someone of use."

*Shit.* Draco really had to find a way to stop this. "My lord, I really do not think -"

"Very well," said Voldemort, speaking over him. "You have my approval. Bellatrix, Draco will administer your punishment and then you will head to the Ministry. Have the taboo begin tomorrow."

"Yes, my lord. I will have it begin promptly at midnight," she said with a smile.

"Draco, you may leave after giving Bellatrix her punishment, then you should take a day to recuperate. We will continue our discussion once you are in full health."

"Yes, my lord," said Draco, trying to stay focused as his mind became fogged with the horrible news he would have to bring home to Hermione.

"Rodolphus, *you* will follow me."

"Y-yes, my lord," said Rodolphus as he nervously followed Voldemort out of the room.

Once they were gone, Bellatrix stood directly in front of Draco and waited for him to administer her punishment.

"*Crucio*!" he shouted, but his heart really was not into it.

"That was weak," said Bellatrix, whose knees had barely buckled throughout the curse. "Just how many times were *you* punished?"

"Thirty-nine," said Draco, taking those last few steps towards the fireplace and grabbing a handful of Floo powder.

"Where are you going? The Dark Lord said you must punish me. Do it again."

"No," said Draco. "If you find my punishment unsatisfactory then ask the Dark Lord to do it instead."

"Just what was it the two of you were discussing?" she asked.

"My future," he answered, tossing his powder into the flames and smirking at her. "It looks like you and I will be equals soon." Draco stepped into the flames. "Have a good day, auntie dearest."

He Flooed home, the feeling of being sucked through a tight tube spinning his already dizzy head. When he landed, he heard someone say his name, but he did not have time to register who it was before he was falling to the floor, landing hard on his hands and hacking up blood.

"Shit, Malfoy!"

Draco looked up to see Bronson and Theo hovering over him while Quigley stood behind them, looking concerned. No Hermione.

Then Draco heard a thud, followed by footsteps coming from the bedroom.

"Get me up," he ordered.

"Draco, I don't think -"

"Get me up!"

Draco cast a nonverbal spell to clean the mess while Bronson and Theo helped him to his feet. They had just stabilized him when the bedroom door flew open. Hermione located him with her swollen eyes and darted across the room.

"Draco!" She went to hug him but quickly pulled back when she noticed the condition he was in. It was obvious she was trying really hard not to sob.

Grabbing sternly onto her shoulders, Draco looked directly into her red and amber eyes and said, "You are *never* going out there again. Not to the Black Market, not to Andromeda's, nowhere. You understand?"

Hermione nodded, tears finally spilling from her eyes as the sleeves on his robes fell back and she got a look at his wounded arms.

"Good," he said, finally pulling her into him and hugging her through the pain.

Hermione carefully put her arms around his back, barely grazing her fingers since she was afraid to injure him more.

"Where's the potion?" she asked, turning her head to look at Theo.

"Right." He went into the kitchen and came back with a goblet full of a blue liquid.

This potion was more of a soother than the one his father had given him, which had been meant to heal his bruises.

"Did you take any for yourself?" asked Draco as Theo handed him the goblet.

Theo shook his head.

"Astoria wasn't wrong, Theo. Take care of yourself. I'll be fine."

Draco tried to hand the goblet back to him, but Theo shook his head again. "I'll go get my own." He returned to the kitchen.

Draco's hand began to shake. Noticing this, Hermione took the goblet and helped him drink it down. "You need to get off your feet," she said, putting the goblet down on the coffee table before draping one of Draco's arms around her shoulders. "Bronson, help me move him to the bedroom."

"Hermione, I'm fi -"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence, Draco Malfoy!" she snapped. "You are obviously *not* fine."

Draco quickly shut his mouth.

Bronson came up on his other side. "I could always just carry him, Hermione."

"What, like I'm some fucking damsel in distress?" said Draco with a sneer. "I'll pass."

Bronson smirked. "Well, it's nice to know you're just as charming as ever." He draped Draco's other arm around his shoulders, and he and Hermione helped him limp towards the bedroom.

Draco carefully climbed onto the bed, collapsing onto his back.

"Prop him up, Bronson. I want to get these clothes off of him."

"Fuck. No," said Draco, moving away and cringing as Bronson came towards him.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Must you always be so difficult?"

"Yes."

"Fine," she said. "Bronson, you can go."

He nodded and left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Once he was gone, Hermione waved her wand at Draco, causing him to shoot up to a seated position. He cringed even more than before, but she kept him stuck like that while she pulled off his robes, followed by his jumper, shirt and trousers.

Once Draco was in nothing but his boxer shorts, Hermione took a moment to run her eyes over his body, taking in every last cut and bruise that had formed on his beautiful, porcelain skin. Her eyes began to flood again and, despite her best efforts to hold them in, her tears spilled over. She reached out and traced her fingers down his chest.

Draco grabbed her hand and entwined his fingers with hers. "Hermione … please don't cry."

"How could he do this to you?" she asked with a whimper. "He believes you're on his side. Why would he hurt you like this?"

"He's not exactly logical," said Draco.

Hermione waved her wand and he slowly began to lower back down to the bed.

"Could you get Theo?" he asked. "There's something I need to tell both of you."

Hermione nodded and wiped at her eyes before going to the door. She opened it and called Theo's name. A few seconds later, he walked into the room.

"What is it?" asked Theo. "Is this about what the Dark Lord said to you?"

Draco shook his head. "This is about Rodolphus. He had a fucking idea for the first time in his life and the Dark Lord agreed to it." His head turned towards Hermione. "It was about you."

Hermione looked at him solemnly and asked, "What is it?"

Draco sighed deeply, but the movement hurt his insides and he ended up cringing again. Hermione tried to come to his aid but he held his hand up. "Hermione."

She stopped.

"They … they have decided to put a taboo on your name. In an attempt to recapture you."

Hermione continued to gaze back at him, her eyes unblinking as her body became

very still.

"Bellatrix is already at the Ministry setting it up. It will be brought into effect at midnight." Draco moved his eyes to Theo. "Theo, I need you to -"

"Warn Andromeda. I'm on it," said Theo. He glanced sideways at Hermione and sighed before leaving the room, making sure to shut the door behind him.

As soon as they were alone, Draco called Hermione's name, but she did not seem to hear him. It was not until he started sliding his body across the bed that her eyes focused again. She reached out to stop him and he grabbed her hand, pulling her down so she was sitting beside him.

"Hermione, say something."

"They …" Hermione took several deep breaths. "They're taking my name?"

Draco reached his hand up and stroked her cheek. "Yes," he said with a heavy heart.

"It …" She closed her eyes and gulped, letting herself sink into his touch. "It's not fair."

"I know."

"They've already taken so much. They …" Her eyes snapped back open. "They've taken everything, Draco!" She shot up from the bed and began pacing around frantically. "They've taken it all! My life! My friends! My virginity! My mind! My father! And today … today they tried to take you!"

"No," said Draco, shaking his head. "No, they didn't -"

"Yes they did! *Thirty-nine* curses?" she spat. "You could have died! *Should* have died! I mean, even *I* was never hit that many times in one sitting! And now … my name." She closed her eyes and clenched her fists. "MY FUCKING NAME!"

Draco wanted more than anything to get to her. He tried to push himself up, but her eyes immediately shot back open and she hurried forward, carefully pushing him back down before sinking into the spot beside him.

"Please … don't, Draco," she cried, squeezing her eyes shut again and letting her tears drip onto his chest. "I don't want you to hurt any more than you already do."

"They're just bruises, Hermione. Seeing you like this … that's what hurts."

Hermione opened her eyes and looked at him sadly before leaning in to delicately kiss his lips.

Draco reached up and moved her hair out of her face, carefully tucking it behind her ear. "And you forget. *I* took your virginity. Not them."

Hermione chuckled softly through her tears and kissed him again. She lied down beside him and the two of them held hands in silence. A good hour passed before Hermione finally asked him, "What did You-Know-Who want to speak to you about?"

"I'm not entirely sure," answered Draco. "He's not exactly forthright. But he … he has deemed me loyal enough to learn more of his secrets. He says from now on I will be an equal to Bellatrix."

"He's bringing you closer?" asked Hermione, gazing over at him. "So that you can become more like him?"

"Yes, it seems that way."

Hermione took a deep breath and said, "No. You can't do that, Draco. You already do so much for him. Every day I see your soul becoming more torn. You *cannot* give him more of you."

"I don't really have a choice," said Draco, his silver eyes looking as dark and gloomy as the sky during a thunderstorm.

"Yes, you do," she said, squeezing tightly onto his hand. "You can come with me. We can find a way out of here tomorrow and You-Know-Who won't have any idea until -"

"No," Draco said sternly. "I cannot go with you, Hermione. It's too dangerous. Especially now that he has decided I'm trustworthy. If he finds out I'm a traitor then he will not rest until I'm found. You're safety is the most important thing to me. I won't risk -"

"But your safety is the most important thing to *me*!" shouted Hermione as she shot back up. "It's *not* safe for you here, Draco! I won't leave you here!"

Draco sighed. He reached up and brought her head down towards his. "I don't want to lose you either, you know?"

"Then why won't you come with me?" she cried while plopping her forehead against his. "I love you, you idiot. I love you …"

"I love you too."

Draco kept his eyes open, watching Hermione as she cried above him. He hated this, seeing her cry, knowing that it would soon be over for them. But he had to do it. He had to let her go.

"Hermione …"

Hermione opened her eyes and gazed down at him.

Draco brought a hand up and wiped her tears with his thumb. "Hermione, I … I want to feel you."

"What?" she asked.

"I want to feel you," he repeated. "The only way I made it through all of that torture earlier was by thinking of you, and I just want to make sure that you're really here. That I'm really still alive."

Hermione chuckled and whimpered at the same time. "*Really*, Draco? *Now*?"

"No time like the present," he said with a grin.

She smiled back at him and stroked his lips. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I think I can suffer through a little pain for a shag," he said. "Now, take off your clothes. I'm not exactly in any condition to strip you."

Hermione full on laughed now. She stood up and slowly undressed. Then she lied back down so her body was pressed against his side. Draco cupped her cheek and kissed her softly, making sure to keep contact as she moved her hand into his boxers and began to stroke him.

Before long, Hermione was straddling his waist and discarding his boxers somewhere on the floor. She moved around, trying to find the best way to do this while causing him as little pain as possible. Draco tried to distract her by pulling her head down and kissing her more aggressively.

Sinking into his lips, Hermione put one hand by his side while using the other to carefully guide him inside of her. Draco immediately moaned into her mouth.

"Yes. Definitely real," he said before biting onto her bottom lip.

Using her arm strength to keep herself from collapsing onto his body, Hermione

slowly began to move on top of him. Draco kept his eyes open, closely watching her as her face began to radiate soft pleasure. She pulled away from his lips and opened her eyes so she could gaze back at him. The moment she did, Draco moved one of his hands and began stroking her clit. Her moans grew louder.

"Hermione … move faster."

"But -"

"I'm fine," said Draco. "We both know you won't come like this and I want to *feel* you. All of you."

Hermione nodded. She let her body sink a little lower as she began bouncing more fervently. Both of them kept their eyes open, only focused on each other as they grew closer and closer to their release.

"Hermione …" Draco wanted to see her name as much as he could before it was taken away from him completely.

"Draco!"

As Hermione's orgasm hit her, she arched her back, causing her ring to dangle over Draco's eyes. While staring at it, he immediately remembered the place he had gone to escape the pain caused by his torture. Their future.

He looked past the ring to see Hermione's eyes were back on him, her speed never faltering even through her bliss. Looking into those amber eyes, Draco immediately found his own euphoria. Hermione leaned down and kissed him through it, her arms becoming shaky as she continued to hold herself up. Draco wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his chest. The reward of having her there was well worth the pain.

It took them a little longer to catch their breath since their lips never parted but, once they did, Draco pulled away slowly, running one hand through her hair and never once looking away from those eyes.

"I love you, Hermione," he said, completely numb to any pain but the one he felt in his heart.

Hermione smiled softly and said, "And I love *you*, Draco."

And then, for a brief moment, that aching feeling that had permanently made a home in Draco's chest since the moment he had made her his finally released. This was *it*. That complete satisfaction he had always wanted, always craved.

Never in Draco's life had he ever felt so complete.

Draco and Hermione remained lost in each other's eyes, neither of them noticing as the clock in the living room chimed midnight, because it did not matter. What the two of them had was so much more, so much stronger than a name. Voldemort could take what he wanted from them, but he could never take this. *Love*. It truly was the strongest form of magic out there.

# Chapter 24: Helter Skelter

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"Hold still, will you?" ordered Hermione as Draco fidgeted on the bed. She was trying to rub the last of the blue paste he had purchased for her that first day on his bruises, but he was being difficult.

"You shouldn't waste that stuff on me, love. It's *supposed* to be for when you leave."

The faint hint of a smile crept onto her face. "I'll send Bronson to buy me more." She grabbed his arm and held it still while rubbing the paste on it. This time, he gave in and let her. "So is that what you're going to call me now?"

Draco smirked. "Maybe. Why, do you not like it? I can always call you Granger. The owl I got this morning *did* say the taboo was only on your first name."

"Whatever you want, Draco. I'm not exactly in a position to complain."

"I suppose I can always mix it up every now and then like your pretend boyfriend. Would you like that, sugar lips?"

Hermione chuckled. "'*Love*' or '*Granger*' will work just fine."

Draco watched closely as Hermione began rubbing the blue paste on his chest. He could not help but smile. "It seems we have come in full circle, haven't we?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, her hands never stopping as she glanced up at his face.

"First you gave me a cupcake, and now you're taking care of me while I'm hurt. Just add a bath to this, love, and it's like we've gone back in time."

Hermione smirked. "Well, I was considering giving you one to clean off all of this dry blood." She scraped a bit of it off of his chest, trying hard not to rub the gash it had come from.

"Really?" said Draco, raising his eyebrows. "And will you be naked too?"

"Not if you want to complete the circle. You were very respectful that first night."

"Yes, well, I was a little afraid to get a full view of the damage. Just seeing you with your clothes on was horrid enough."

Hermione sighed. "Still," she said. "I know I didn't say it then, but what you did for me that first night. It … it meant a lot."

"It wasn't creepy?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, Draco, *you're* not creepy. I was referring to the situation. I mean, what inspired you to buy me a cupcake anyway?"

Draco attempted to shrug, but Hermione grabbed his shoulders and held them still. Then she rubbed the paste on them. "I don't know. I just passed this woman in the Black Market selling them and I thought, 'Oh, right! It's her birthday,' so I bought one. I didn't realize it was going to be this big thing that you all would *never* let go."

Hermione's smile grew wider as she moved her hands down to his legs. Suddenly, Draco gulped, so she looked up at him again.

"So, you … you saw Ron yesterday."

"I did," she said casually as she went back to her task.

"And …?"

"And what?" she asked.

Draco said nothing.

Hermione frowned. "If you, for some reason, believe that there was some magical moment of clarity where I realized that he's the one I'm supposed to be with then you'd be wrong, Draco. I made my choice and I'm standing by it."

He could not help but smile.

"But that doesn't mean I felt nothing when I saw him," she added quickly before he could get too smug about it. "Sometimes I forget how much I miss him and Harry, but seeing him … it was a bit of a reality check, I suppose."

Draco's smile faded.

Hermione sighed. "I'm not giving up on you, you know? I *want* you to come with me, and I have always had a knack for achieving what I want."

"Yes, you're very stubborn," said Draco.

"Not compared to you."

"That's debatable."

Hermione rolled her eyes again. She waved her wand and the water in the bathtub began running. Then she waved it again and Draco rose up, levitating over the bed. She carefully guided his broken body into the washroom and lowered him into the water. She grabbed a washcloth out of the cupboard under the sink, and used soap to lather it up before climbing onto the edge and straddling Draco between her legs.

"You're *really* not going to get in here with me?"

"No, Draco. The point of this bath is to get you clean, not dirty."

"Says who?" asked Draco with a smirk.

"Me."

"Well, *I* say otherwise."

Draco grabbed firmly onto Hermione's arm. She let out a loud, 'Eek!' as he flipped her over his shoulder and into the tub. Merlin, that hurt! But it was worth it to see the angry look on her face as she moved her wet hair out of her eyes.

"Draco Malfoy, you have some nerve! How dare you -"

He silenced her with a kiss. It was the easiest way to distract her, especially since he had no intention of letting her stay in those wet clothes.

Draco slowly began to unbutton her pajama top, which he was able to get all the way off without too much protest.

"You're such an arse!" she said while shoving him away. When he cringed, she immediately felt guilty and began stroking his chest. "I'm sorry! Did I hurt you?"

"No," he lied, taking this moment to slip his hand into her bottoms, not even giving her a moment before plunging a finger into her.

It was not long before her bottoms and knickers were off, and she was bouncing on top of him.

"Fuck, Her - Granger!"

When her name almost slipped out, Hermione slowed, but Draco grabbed firmly onto her hips and began moving her faster again, the sound of water splashing

only making it more exhilarating. Her nails dug into his back as she drew closer to her climax. It hurt like hell, but Draco really did not care in that moment, because the more important part of his body felt great.

"Merlin, how do you always feel so fucking amazing?" he whispered into her ear before sucking down her neck.

Hermione came first, but Draco kept a firm grip on her hips and it was not long before he followed.

Out of breath, he looked into her eyes, smirked and said, "Bet you never thought you'd be doing that in a tub with me the first time I bathed you?"

Hermione smirked back. "Definitely not." She removed her nails from his skin. "I really am being an awful caregiver. I'm pretty sure all I've done is cause more damage."

"I disagree," said Draco. "Personally, I think you just might be the best caregiver I've ever had. Give me five minutes and I'll be able to show you my gratitude."

Hermione giggled as he began kissing down her neck again. Then, just when he reached her collarbone, she froze. Keeping his lips in place, Draco glanced up at her.

"Draco, I … I think someone is at the front door."

"What?"

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

"There! Did you hear that?" she asked, turning her head. "Someone is knocking."

"Theo can get -"

"I sent him to the Black Market this morning to get you more Healing Potions. I don't think he's back yet."

Draco groaned. "Oh, bloody hell."

Hermione got out first and grabbed her wand. She used it to lift Draco out of the tub, and then levitated a robe out of his wardrobe for him. He slipped it on.

"Walking is bloody painful," he said while slowly moving into the bedroom.

Hermione followed him and grabbed her own robe off of the chair it hung over before putting it on. On his way out, Draco grabbed both of his wands off of the dresser and put them in his robe pocket.

"Don't get too comfortable," he said as he reached his bedroom door. "We're far from finished with that bath." He winked before opening the door and shutting it behind him.

Whoever was at the front door was knocking more aggressively now.

"I'm fucking coming!" he called. It took him a while, but he eventually reached the door and looked through the peephole. He groaned. It was fucking Bellatrix.

Draco threw the door open. "What the fuck do *you* want?" he asked with a sneer.

"The Dark Lord sent me," she answered. "He asked that I bring you *this*." Bellatrix moved out of the way and motioned to Rodolphus's slave, who was standing nervously on the staircase.

Draco crossed his arms. "I don't fucking want her."

"Not permanently, *Nephew*. Just for the day. To take care of you."

"Why isn't she taking care of her own bloody master? I can't imagine he's in the greatest of conditions right now."

Bellatrix grunted. "No, he isn't. But the Dark Lord has asked *me* to take care of my husband. So, until tomorrow, this nuisance belongs to you."

"I'm not interested," said Draco, trying to shut the door, but Bellatrix put her foot in the way.

"You don't really have a choice. These are the Dark Lord's orders and you *must* obey."

"No," said Draco, kicking her foot out of the way and trying to shut his door again.

But Bellatrix was persistent. She slammed her hand against the door and forcefully pushed it open, grabbing Draco's shoulder and pressing her thumb into a particularly painful looking bruise.

Draco cried out in agony as he fell to his knees.

"Get in there," she ordered the girl, who was quick to obey. "Bring her with you

when you come to the Dark Lord's manor for Death Eater duties in the morning."

Bellatrix grabbed the door handle and shut Draco and the girl inside.

When Draco tried to get back to his feet, the slave moved to help him. He pushed her off. "Go home. You're not fucking wanted here." Looking at the girl, Draco could see that her eyes were already swollen from crying. Not to mention her face from a brutal beating, or several.

She gulped. "But … my master says I must serve you. He made it quite clear that I am to stay with you until morning."

"Aren't you fucking worried about him?" Draco really did not care about the answer, he just wanted her to leave.

The girl looked taken aback. Obviously, she was not asked many questions. "Y-yes. Of course. I love my master. But he has ordered me to -"

"Merlin, you're a fucking puppet. Don't you ever think for yourself?"

"I …" She looked unsure of how to answer. "I must follow orders. The Dark Lord wishes me here and my master wishes to please the Dark Lord. I am to … to be of any assistance to you that I can."

She blushed, causing Draco to raise his eyebrows. Then she was moving towards him, slipping her hands into the inside of his robe. Draco backed away.

"What are you -?"

The girl moved with him, grabbing onto the tie holding his robe together and pulling. *Shit.*

"Get your fucking hands off me!"

"But my master says I must! He says I must assist you in the same way I assist him!"

Draco grabbed her hands to stop her, but his body was currently very weak and his legs gave in as he struggled, sending them both toppling to the ground.

"Ah! FUCK!"

When Draco screamed, the door to his bedroom flew open and Hermione ran out of it. Her eyes widened in anger when she saw there was a girl lying on top of him.

Then the girl looked up and their eyes met. Draco knew instantly that they recognized each other.

"Yo … yo … *you*!" shouted the girl, suddenly looking livid. "You fucking bitch!"

In a flash, the girl was on her feet and lunging for her, but Hermione quickly waved her wand, sending her flying back into one of the dining room chairs and binding her to it.

"Untie me! Untie me and fight me without hiding behind your bloody wand! Let me slit your fucking throat open like *you* did *his*!"

With another wave of Hermione's wand, the girl went silent, but her mouth kept moving.

"What the fuck are you doing out here?" asked Draco, struggling to get to his feet.

Hermione hurried over and helped him. "I'm sorry but, when I heard you scream, I thought someone was attacking you."

"She bloody fucking was," said Draco, draping an arm around her shoulders while she pulled him up. "She's Rodolphus's personal slave. I think he told her to shag me."

Hermione crinkled her nose and looked at the girl. "*Gross*."

"Whatever," said Draco. "She's just a Muggle so her memories will be easy enough to alter." He paused and looked at the girl, who was still trying to scream at them. "You know her?"

"Yes," said Hermione, following his eyes. "She was the slave I replaced the night I escaped. She tried to convince him to keep her instead, but, when she called me a whore, he tortured and banished her. How did she end up as his *personal* slave?"

"She gave information on …" Draco stopped dead. "*Shit*. Theo."

"She gave information on Theo?" Hermione asked curiously.

"No, she -"

Just then, the front door flew open and Theo walked inside. They both turned their heads towards him, but he did not even notice them standing there until his shoes were already off.

"Th-fuck you two looking at?" asked Theo while removing his cloak. He turned to hang it in the closet, but then he noticed the girl tied to the chair. He froze. It took a moment for him to register where he knew her. His eyes narrowed. "*You.*"

The girl's eyes widened and she gulped.

Theo whipped his head towards Draco. "What the fuck is *she* doing here?"

"The Dark Lord sent her to take care of me," answered Draco.

"Well, that explains why I saw the fucking Lestrange carriage flying outside. Fucking little …" Theo dropped his cloak and stormed over to the girl. He slapped her hard across the face.

Hermione gasped.

"THEO!" Draco shouted. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"This is the fucking bitch … the FUCKING BITCH who turned in Anna!"

"I know, but you can't bloody slap a woman like that!"

"She's not a fucking woman, Draco! She's a selfish *fucking* monster! Someone innocent is dead because *she* fell in love with a rapist!"

The girl's face fell into a horrible scowl as she resumed her yelling.

Theo waved his unregistered wand and returned her voice.

"He is *not* a rapist you fucking bastard!" she screamed in a strained voice, angry tears flooding from her eyes. "He's good and kind and he loves me!"

Draco and Theo both laughed, but Hermione put her face behind Draco's back to hide her disgust. She could not even look at this pathetic girl. Thank Merlin she had never been brainwashed like this.

"You're all sick!" she continued to shout. "How could you betray him like this? By harboring *her*! The filthy whore who doesn't deserve to be fucking breathing!"

Draco began to lunge forward, but Hermione grabbed his arm and held him back.

"You better hold your fucking tongue, bitch!" he shouted back at her.

The girl laughed.

The door opened and they all turned to see Bronson enter. "What's with all the bloody shouting?" he asked while kicking off his shoes.

They all turned back to the girl and Bronson followed their heads. His mouth fell open.

The girl stared back at him with squinted eyes. "Bronson?" she asked.

"Fiona?"

The two of them continued to gape at each other.

"W-what are you doing here?" he asked, taking a skeptical step forward. Then he looked at Theo. "*Why* is she tied to a fucking chair?"

Bronson hurried towards her and reached out for the ropes, but Theo stepped in his way and held his wand out. "Don't you dare fucking untie her!"

"But … what's going on?" asked Bronson, looking back at Draco and Hermione. "Why would you bring her here just to tie her up?"

They all cocked their heads and blinked.

"Bronson, what are you talking about?" asked Hermione. "She's just a slave sent here to take care of Draco."

"You … you mean you didn't find her and bring her here?"

More vacant blinking.

"How the fuck do you know her?" asked Theo, keeping his wand steadily aimed at him.

Bronson turned back, looked Theo in the eye and said, "She's Quigley's sister. His fucking little sister! And you have her tied to a bloody chair! *Why*, Theo?" he shouted.

"*Shit*," whispered Draco while Hermione clutched on tighter to his arm.

Theo finally lowered his wand, his face falling into a frown as he sighed deeply. "Well, you might want to warn him to bloody prepare himself, because *this* girl is fucking gone."

"What do you mean?" asked Bronson, tears filling his eyes as he tried to look past

Theo to Fiona.

"Bronson …" Hermione stepped forward. "She … she's a slave to the Death Eater whose throat I cut to escape, and … well, she's a bit bitter about it."

"Bitter?" he repeated, pursing his eyebrows. "But he's a sick bastard. He bought all of that Amortentia to -"

"NOOO!" Fiona shouted suddenly. They all looked to see she had her eyes clenched shut and was crying hysterically. "It was not for *her*! He would *never* run away with *her*! He would never leave me!"

"Oh?" said Draco. "And is that what you told his wife when you bloody showed her where it was hidden?"

Fiona's eyes opened and she stared daggers at him. "He loves me," she said through gritted teeth.

"Fiona, what has happened to you?" asked Bronson while wiping at his eyes.

Before she could answer, the door opened again and Quigley walked in. They all whipped their heads towards him, Bronson joining Theo in blocking Fiona from view.

Quigley looked at all of them curiously. "What are you all -?"

"Zander?" said Fiona. *Shit.* No one had thought to silence her again. "ZANDER! Zander, help me!"

Quigley became very still as he listened to the voice. The moment it clicked in his head was very clear. "What the fuck?" he asked, running forward and pushing Bronson and Theo out of the way. "Fiona!"

"Zander!" she cried. "Zander, please! Untie me!"

Quigley reached his hands out, but Theo raised his wand and aimed it at his neck. "*Don't*," he said sternly.

"I … I don't …" He turned and looked at his friend. "Bronson?"

Bronson sighed and looked ashamedly towards the floor. "Sorry, mate. But *this* isn't Fiona."

"Yes I am you fucking pansy!"

Bronson smirked halfheartedly. "At least you still have that mouth of yours."

"As I recall, you used to get a lot of joy out of it before you flipped your bloody switch on me!"

Bronson chuckled. Noticing Theo watching him with raised eyebrows, he said, "She was my last girlfriend before I 'switched' teams. Always been a bit bitter about it."

"Yeah, because you fucking cheated on me with a *man*!"

"Hey, you're the one who said you wanted to bring another person into the bedroom to liven things up. It's not my fault you chose a man instead of a -"

"I *thought* we agreed never to talk about this in front of me!" shouted Quigley, who had turned bright crimson. "What do you mean this isn't fucking Fiona, Bronson? It certainly seems like her."

"Because it *is* me, Zander" she insisted. "He's just been fucking blinded by this traitorous Death Eater he keeps eyeing!" She motioned her head towards Theo.

"I'm not the one who's been blinded, Fiona," said Bronson, crossing his arms. "You're the one who's fallen in love with her slave owning rapist."

Quigley went white.

Fiona laughed. "He's not my fucking rapist, Bronson, and you know why? Because you *can't* rape the willing!"

"This is sickening," Draco whispered to Hermione. Noticing he was getting a bit wobbly on his feet, she used her wand to bring one of his armchairs over and sat him in it.

"Whose slave is she?" Quigley asked weakly, reaching out and touching a bruise on her face. She flinched.

"The man who Granger slit right here," said Theo, dragging his finger across his throat. He winked at her.

Fiona went crazy trying to get to him. "You bastard! You fucking bastard! He is ten times the wizard you'll ever be! He's strong! He's powerful! And he loves me! Not *her*!" She motioned her head towards Hermione, who was sitting on the edge of Draco's chair with his arm wrapped around her waist. When she tensed, he tightened his grip.

"Sure. Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart," said Theo. He leaned forward and patted her on the cheek.

Fiona's nostrils flared in anger. She spit at him.

Theo jumped. "Fucking bitch!" He tried to lunge forward but Bronson grabbed him and held him back.

"Don't you bloody hurt her, Theo! I promise this is *not* the girl I grew up with! She's been brainwashed! She's -"

"I HAVE NOT!" she screamed. Then her eyes fell back on Hermione. They narrowed. "I know about the taboo, you bitch! HERMI -"

All of them took out their wands and hit her with a Silencing Charm at the same time. The impact of all five spells at once sent her chair flying backwards as she was knocked unconscious. The moment she was out, Quigley started crying.

Theo looked torn for a second while Bronson comforted his friend. But he eventually caved and put the chair back on its legs so she would not be stuck on the floor like that.

Hermione stood up and walked over to them. "Quigley … this isn't any sort of magical brainwashing. She's just confused. When … when Muggles are first made slaves they are tortured horribly. Worse than Muggle-borns. And Rodolphus … he doesn't torture his slaves. She must have mistaken this for …" She gulped, "… for love. It's fixable. It's -"

"Brainwashing without magic is *not* better, Her -" Quigley paused and took a breath. "Granger. It's worse. It means it can't be reversed with a Counter-Spell. She's fucked. Her mind is literally fucked!"

"You don't know that," said Draco, pushing himself up carefully from his chair. "Rodolphus is at the top of my fucking hit list. When he is gone, she might get over it quicker than you think. And now that Theo and I know who she is, we can keep an eye on -"

"Keep an eye?" said Quigley, looking at him curiously. "You're … you're not sending her back there?"

Draco and Theo looked at each other and sighed. "We don't have a choice," said Draco. "She was only given to me for the night. I have to return her in the morning."

"Return her?" Quigley's eyes began to flare. "She's my sister, *not* a fucking object, Malfoy!"

"Her owner would disagree."

Quigley's teeth clenched. He stormed forward and stopped in front of Draco, punching him hard in the jaw before continuing towards the balcony, fumbling in his pockets until he came out with his pack of cigarettes.

Hermione ran to Draco's aid while Bronson followed Quigley out.

"That came out worse than I meant it to," said Draco, rubbing at his jaw.

Hermione sighed and gave it a kiss. "I know. And I'm sure Quigley will realize that too once he's had a moment to cool down."

"Well, *this* is a fucking disaster," said Theo, who was still standing by Fiona and staring at her. "Seriously, out of *all* the slaves in the fucking city, what are the chances?"

"One in a million," said Hermione as she helped Draco back into his armchair.

Theo huffed. "I hate this bitch. And I hate our small fucking world."

Hermione looked over at an unconscious Fiona and sighed. She could not agree more.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"So you've snogged Bronson, Bronson has snogged Fiona, and Fiona has snogged Roddy. So, by association, you have *also* snogged Roddy," Draco concluded with a smirk as he and Theo stood in Voldemort's drawing room, talking quietly while waiting for their weekly meeting to begin.

"It doesn't fucking work like that, Draco!" snapped Theo. They both looked over their shoulders to see Fiona doting over Rodolphus, who was still greatly wounded from his own punishment from the Dark Lord. So was Draco, but he was not the type of person to make a big deal out of it.

"What are the two of you bloody looking at?" asked Rodolphus, his wand to his throat as he threw an empty bottle from a potion he had been drinking into Fiona's hands. "Enjoyed my slave the other night, did you?"

"Not at all," said Draco. "I ended up tying her to a fucking chair and knocking her

out all night so she would stop trying to bloody rape me." And she had woken up the following morning with no memory of any of it, except for the first minute or so that she was in the flat. Once she and Draco hit the floor, her mind went out. Quigley was pretty pissed about it, but it was safer for all of them to erase everything, not just Hermione.

"You can't rape the willing."

Well, *that* sounded familiar.

"Oh, and was Granger willing?" spat Theo. "You know, *before* she slit your throat."

Fiona's eyes snapped up at him. Theo smirked. She may not have remembered meeting him but he sure as hell remembered her, and he planned on fucking with her every chance he got.

Rodolphus scowled at the two of them before turning away.

Draco and Theo laughed, but then Draco's sides began to ache and he cringed. Theo took a small phial of green liquid out of his pocket and handed it to him.

"I knew you would forget to bring your own."

"*You* did?" Draco asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Theo smirked. "You know what I mean."

Draco did. Hermione really was always looking out for him. He took the phial and drank it down.

"How are you two feeling?" asked Astoria, walking up to them.

"I've been better," said Draco, tossing the empty phial into the fireplace.

"I can imagine." Astoria smiled. She reached into her bag and pulled out two thermoses, handing one to each of them. "I made this for you. It's an old healing remedy my house-elf taught me. Tastes just like herbal tea."

Draco opened his thermos and gave it a sniff. He looked up at her. "Swear you're not poisoning us?"

"Only if my father put some in there."

Draco cocked an eyebrow.

Astoria laughed and rolled her eyes. "Don't worry. He was nowhere near it. I made it in my flat and my father is still staying here with the Dark Lord."

"Still not speaking to him?" asked Draco, taking a sip. Theo was still looking at his thermos uncertainly.

"Yes, but it becomes very difficult when he will not stop trying to speak to *me*."

"Astoria!" her father called from the other side of the room.

She grunted. "See what I mean?"

Astoria ignored her father and stayed with Draco and Theo until Voldemort arrived. They all went into the conference room and sat at the giant table Draco had been tortured on mere days before.

The meeting went as usual. There was nothing new or particularly exciting to report, but Draco did note that Yaxley and Mathis Flint were missing.

When the meeting ended, Draco had barely gotten out of the room when someone was grabbing his arm. He turned to see his father. His arms were a bit shaky and his face looked more worn than the last time he saw him.

"Were you punished for giving me that potion?" asked Draco.

"Of course I was," answered Lucius. "I was just … hoping we could have a moment to speak. Just the two of us. I have been trying to find some time since I arrived in London, but you always seem to be previously engaged."

"Yes," said Draco. "And I am now. So, if you will excuse me." He tried to pull out of his father's grip, but Lucius only clutched on tighter.

"Draco, it's important."

"I'm sure it is," said Draco, seizing his father's wrist and yanking him off of his arm. "But I really have no interest in -"

"My lord! MY LORD!"

Everyone still there turned their heads to see Mathis and Yaxley running through the corridor. Mathis was carrying something in his hand and waving it around frantically. Draco squinted to see it was a wand. A broken wand. A familiar broken wand …

His heart stopped.

*Shit.*

Mathis and Yaxley pushed him and his father apart and entered the conference room.

"What the fuck is that about?" asked Theo, coming to his side.

"My lord, we have found my son's wand!"

"And what interest does that hold for me, Mathis?" Voldemort said coldly.

"My lord, I know my son holds little interest with you, but his disappearance was so close to the escape of Potter's Mudblood! I have thought since the beginning that it was too much of a coincidence!"

Theo went stiff beside Draco. He glanced sideways at him and noticed how pale Draco had become. "You didn't," he whispered.

Draco's throat went raw. He gulped. "He had her. I had no choice."

"I have been trying to trace his wand around the city since he first disappeared. I found it in the river two weeks ago," continued Mathis, "and I have waited to bring it to you until I had something!"

Voldemort relaxed his stance and said, "Go on."

Mathis sighed in relief. "I have tracked my son's steps that last night. His wand was last used in an alley, but I found no traces of his body. I was hoping you would do the honor, my lord, of viewing what his wand saw during his last few spells."

Theo grabbed Draco's arm and slowly began to back them out of there. He did not stop until they were in the drawing room.

"What are they going to see, Draco?" he asked, leaning in close to him and speaking softly just in case someone decided they had no interest in this and tried to leave.

"I … I used his wand to kill him. He said my name. He definitely said my fucking name!"

Draco's fists clenched. He lifted one and slammed it hard against the wall.

"Stop that," said Theo, grabbing his arm. "And keep your fucking voice down." He glanced back at the corridor and bit his lip. Then he looked back at Draco and sighed. "Go. Get her out of here. Right now."

"But what about y -"

"I'll hold them off here for as long as I can." Theo let go of Draco's arm. "When Granger asks you to go with her, because we both know she will, you … you should do it."

"What?" said Draco, looking astounded. "But, Theo, that would be insane. I could never just go like that, and I would never leave you here to deal with this on your own."

"I'll be fucking fine, Draco," said Theo, moving towards the corridor. "I'm Imperiused, remember?" He winked. "Now *go*. You're wasting bloody time."

Draco nodded and ran towards the fireplace, Flooing home while Theo went back to the conference room. Lucius was still standing in the corridor, turning as he heard footsteps and noticing that Theo came back alone.

"Where's Draco?" he asked.

"Previously engaged, remember?" said Theo, walking into the conference room. The Dark Lord was just preparing the wand for viewing. Lucius did not follow him inside. His eyes were still focused on the corridor his son had disappeared down.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Back in his flat, Draco began frantically calling Hermione's surname. It only took a few seconds for her to come running out of the bedroom.

"Draco, what's wrong?"

"Get your things," he ordered.

Hermione's face fell. "W-what?"

"Get your bloody things! We have to get you out now!"

She took a few steps towards him. "But, Draco, why? What has happened?"

"We always knew this fucking day would come, Granger, now go and get your bloody things!"

Hermione's heart was racing as she stared at Draco, who was both determined and frightened as he began breathing heavily. This was real. Her eyes began to tear. She turned quickly and ran back into the bedroom.

Draco went to the closet and took out her cloak and shoes, tossing them onto the armchair. Then he went into the kitchen and grabbed anything he could find that might be useful. Potions, herbs, food, everything.

Hermione came back out holding her small bag. Draco grabbed it from her and began stuffing everything inside.

"Let's go," he said, heading towards the door.

"Draco, we … we don't have to go that way."

He turned and furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

Hermione gulped before holding out her hand, showing him a bumpy stone the same color as the inside of a red abalone shell. "This will Apparate us to people who can help. They have a … a business of sorts, getting people out of the city who are trapped here."

Draco became incredibly still as his eyes drew towards hers. "How long have you had that?" he asked hoarsely.

"Just over two weeks," she answered. "They found me when I went to the Black Market with Theo." Hermione closed her palm and took several steps forward. "Draco … please come with me. I … I've already packed for you. I've been taking your clothes for weeks."

Well, that explained the missing jumpers. But Draco still kept her gaze as he shook his head slowly. "I can't."

"Why not?" she shouted with angry tears in her eyes.

"It's too dangerous -"

"That's bullshit! That's fucking bullshit and you know it!"

"Granger, please," said Draco, closing those last few steps between them. He grabbed her arms. "You *need* to go."

"Not without you!" she cried, throwing herself into his arms. "You said you love me, Draco! But if you did then you would come with me! You would come! So that …"

She gulped. "So that we could continue to keep each other safe."

"But me staying behind … *that* is what will keep you safe, Granger. Please …"

"No."

"PLEASE!"

Just then, the alarm on the fireplace went off. Not Theo's. Draco pulled away from Hermione in a panic.

"Go!"

"No!"

"GO!"

"I AM NOT GOING WITHOUT YOU, DRACO!"

"Then fucking hide! Please, do something!"

"No, I won't! I will *not* hide! Not anymore!"

There was a '*swish*' and they both took out their wands, pointing them at the fireplace. Draco put his arm on Hermione and moved her behind him just as his father stepped out of the flames.

Lucius stared back at his son, noticing the cold, determined look in his eyes. Then his gaze drifted to the girl standing behind him. The one he had not seen since the fateful day his wife, and almost his son, had been taken from him. And she was looking back at him now with that same fear in her eyes that still gave him nightmares.

"Draco … what have you done?"

"Whatever do you mean, Father?"

Lucius's eyes moved back to him. "You … you killed Flint, didn't you? That is why you are here."

Draco did not acknowledge his question. "Granger, get your shoes and cloak on."

Hermione kept her head low as she looked nervously at Lucius, her nostrils flaring as she slowly began to move towards the spot where Draco had put her things. He moved his body so it was in front of hers the entire time.

Hermione slipped on her shoes and fastened her cloak, pulling up the hood so her face would be hidden. Then she walked back over to Draco. "Come with me," she said, ignoring Lucius's presence.

Draco looked at her, his lips quivering as his eyes finally began to tear. "I … I can't -"

"COME WITH ME!"

"Draco, don't!" shouted Lucius. "If you go then the Dark Lord will not rest until he has found you! You have to stay!" He looked at Hermione. "You have to put the Imperius Curse on him!" he pleaded. "If you do then we can lie to the Dark Lord! We can tell him Draco was under it the entire time! He will be safe!"

Hermione took several heated breaths through her nose. "Is that what you call the condition Draco was in the other night? Was he '*safe*' when your *lord* hit him with the Cruciatus Curse thirty-nine *fucking* times!" she shouted. "He is *not* safe here!"

"At least if he is here then he will still have a chance at life!"

"This is no fucking life!" Hermione spat, her fists clenching as she turned red with rage. Her entire body was convulsing as she stared at this man she hated. He did not look the least bit like Draco, because *he* was a monster. "What father would ever want this 'life' for his son?"

Lucius's bottom lip fell as he looked ashamedly towards the floor.

"Granger, please."

Hermione turned to see Draco looking sadly at her.

"He's right," he said. "Please … just do it."

A huge crack formed on Hermione's heart as it quickly began to split in two.

XXX

Theo watched nervously as the Dark Lord put Marcus Flint's wand on the table. He cast a spell on it that made thin strings of white light spread around its pieces, pulling them back together. He gulped.

Once the wand was whole again, Voldemort used his to find out the last spell used on it. A Transfiguration Spell. And before that … The Killing Curse.

"Shall we place bets on whether it was young Flint who suffered the fate of that curse or not?" joked Rabastan.

Voldemort smiled. "We all already know it was." He glanced at Mathis. "Shall we see what the wand saw during your son's last seconds of life?"

Mathis slowly nodded.

Voldemort waved his wand in an elaborate pattern in the air and, suddenly, a visual appeared before them. It was Marcus's dead body as someone walked up to it. They transfigured him into an empty butterbeer bottle and tossed it into a dumpster.

Rabastan's eyes began to narrow as he watched the image closely. He knew that spell …

Voldemort waved his wand again and they saw Marcus while he was still alive, sitting on the ground in an alley and looking frightened.

*"You were in the wrong place at the wrong time, Flint. Sorry it has to end like this."*

*"End? Wait, Malfoy, n-"*

A green jet of light shot at him and hit him square in the heart. He fell back dead.

Voldemort's jaw slowly began to lower as his the thin pupil in his snake-like eyes began to darken. He knew that voice. They all did.

Suddenly looking very angry, Voldemort began scanning the room. "Where is Draco?"

Everyone else followed suit. A few Death Eaters walked out of the room to go looking for him.

While they were gone, Voldemort waved his wand again and viewed the spell used on Marcus's wand before that. It was already in Draco's possession and he had used it to send him flying backwards.

Voldemort waved his wand again. Marcus had his wand this time, and he was using it to bind someone's wrists.

*"GET OFF OF ME!"*

Rodolphus's ears perked up at the sound of the voice.

While the person struggled, Marcus's wand jerked upwards, giving them all a clear view of Hermione's face.

"*Where* is DRACO?" Voldemort repeated louder this time. When no one could answer, his eyes moved to Theo. "*You.*"

Theo only had a moment to be fearful before he was pulling his wand out and shooting a Killing Curse at Mathis Flint. In less than a second, he was as dead as his son. Then Theo went for Rodolphus but, before he could strike, someone was shooting a hex at him. He blocked it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Theo watched as Pansy slipped out of the room, then he saw Astoria and Goyle looking horrified. Another hex came at him. He blocked it. Then another.

Theo made a run for it past his two schoolmates, knowing that they were too frozen to do much of anything. He had barely made it into the corridor when someone successfully hit him with the Cruciatus Curse. Theo fell to the floor, screaming out in agony. This was worse than before. Whoever had cast is was very angry with him.

Then his eyes opened and he saw the Dark Lord standing above him. "*Where* is Draco?"

Theo said nothing, playing the part of Imperiused puppet very well.

"I will check his flat, my lord!" shouted Rabastan, running towards the drawing room so that he could Floo there.

"Macnair, go with him!" ordered Voldemort. "I will take care of young Nott."

Theo barely had a moment to look into the smug eyes of his father, who was standing behind the Dark Lord, before an incredible pain overcame him. Then another. And another. And before he had any chance to fight it, the entire world went black.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"Granger, you have to do it."

"No," Hermione cried. "Draco, please don't make me."

"You need to stay safe. This …" Draco gulped, "… is the only way."

Hermione's arm was shaking as she slowly began to raise her wand.

"Do it," Draco ordered.

Hermione whimpered.

"Please … love."

Her eyes widened as he called her this. '*Love*'. A single tear dripped down her cheek. "I'm not ready …" she whispered, "… to let you go."

Lucius's mouth dropped as he watched the performance in front of him. Draco reached up and slowly wiped her tear, tracing his fingers down her cheek.

"Draco, *no*. Not *her*," said Lucius in disbelief.

"Don't you dare judge me, you *fucking* rapist!" shouted Draco, turning back towards his father with flaming eyes. "I hate you." His voice was shaky and full of disdain, and Lucius knew his words were true.

"Draco … it … I … I didn't want -"

Before Lucius could find his train of thought, the alarm went off on the fireplace again. While Lucius and Hermione looked at it, Draco looked at her. *Hermione*. Milky, soft skin. Plump, pink lips. A few light freckles scattered across her nose. And those eyes. Those amber eyes he could never get enough. They moved and looked back at him, wet and beautiful, and Draco knew instantly that he was not ready to let her go either.

Before he knew what he was doing, had anytime to process it, Draco was grabbing her hand. The same hand that still held the bumpy stone. Her amber eyes looked down at their clasped hands, and then back up at him. They lit up.

There was a '*swish*' and someone stepped out of the fireplace. They turned to see Rabastan.

"*You*!" he shouted, looking unbelievingly at Draco and Hermione. "I fucking knew it you TRAITO -"

Draco did not give him the chance to finish before he was blasting him and the fireplace into oblivion. Hermione put up a shield to protect them from the blast, but Lucius was not prepared for it and flew backwards, his face and clothes becoming

drenched in Rabastan's blood and guts. An arm flew by and smacked him in the head. And the fireplace was not in the greatest of conditions either.

Lucius shot back up and looked in disbelief at his son.

"The next time you and I see each other, Father, we will be enemies."

"Draco … Son, please, no …"

Draco closed his eyes and turned away from him. "Granger, go!" he ordered.

Hermione nodded, squeezing onto his hand tighter.

"NO!" shouted Lucius, trying to scramble to his feet through the rubble.

Hermione turned to him, smiling wickedly before vanishing from sight completely, his son disappearing right along with her.

"DRACO!"

**A/N: Sorry for the cliffhanger! I was going to have the chapter be a bit longer, but when I started writing more I realized that it was just too much. I know you all say you like the long chapters, but I really feel there is a limit.**

**On a brighter note, the next chapter is already half finished!**

# Chapter 25: Free as a Bird

**A/N/: I got a lot of positive response to my last chapter. So glad everyone enjoyed it! And now, their escape …**

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"The fireplace is not working, my lord!" shouted Macnair, running back into the corridor. "Lestrange went through but it won't let me!"

Voldemort let out a loud growl of frustration. "Nott, get your fucking son locked up in the dungeon! Macnair, Rodolphus, take your brooms and get to Draco's home! Everyone else, get out there and *find him*!"

Everyone nodded and took off running, except for Bellatrix, who remained by Voldemort's side.

"My lord, what will you do?" she asked.

"I will join the search," he said, already heading for the door. "Draco will *not* escape us tonight!"

<p align="center">XXX</p>

Draco and Hermione reappeared in a small room he did not recognize. It was cluttered with magical knickknacks and he quickly realized they were in a compartment in a train. Then his eyes drifted to the young couple snogging on the counter. They both yelped.

"Oh shit, is it time?" Daphne yelled, pushing Blaise off of her and straightening her twisted jumper.

Draco slowly began to turn his head towards Hermione, his eyes widening as he did so. "*These* are the people who sought you out?"

"Yes," said Hermione. "So?"

"No offense," said Draco, looking coldly at Blaise, "but I think we'll find our own way out." He began pulling Hermione towards the door, but she yanked him back.

"Draco, no!" she shouted. "We wouldn't even know where to begin to get out of London! They were *your* friends. Why don't you trust them?"

"Do *you*?" Draco asked.

"For the right price I do," she said, reaching into her bag and pulling out a pouch of

money. She tossed it at Blaise. "Two-hundred Galleons. It's all there, but we're sort of short on time so I would appreciate it if you would count it later."

Blaise smirked. "I have a hard time believing the Gryffindor princess would scam us. I trust you." He put the pouch into his pocket. Then he looked at Draco. "Good to see you again, Draco."

Draco scowled at him. "What are you doing here, Zabini? I have a hard time believing you have been helping others when the two of you were so quick to show your cowardice after the Dark Lord won."

"People can change," said Blaise.

Daphne smirked and gave Draco a onceover. "Clearly. Who knew the notorious Death Eater, Draco Malfoy, had a soft spot for Harry Potter's right-hand Muggle-born witch?" She moved her gaze to Hermione. "I really never believed you would get him here. Way to prove me wrong." She winked.

"Are we fucking doing this or not?" shouted Draco. "If you haven't noticed by our dramatic entrance, we're on a bit of a tight schedule."

"Yeah, yeah, don't get your knickers all in a twist," said Blaise. "We're just waiting on one more?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "One more?"

"Yes, our third," said Daphne. "We will need all three of us to get you out."

"And if you're here, I can only imagine that she is only minutes behind."

Draco crinkled his forehead. "What do you -?"

Just then, the compartment door slid open and someone in a dark cloak entered. Their hood was up so Draco and Hermione could not see their face.

"Did anyone follow you?" asked Blaise.

"No," they said. "No one even noticed me leave." The person pulled down their hood, revealing the big-eyed pug-face of Pansy Parkinson. "Hello, Draco."

Draco and Hermione immediately raised their wands. "What the fuck is this?" he shouted.

"Relax, Draco," said Blaise. "Pansy has been helping me and Daph here since the

beginning. Her lovely mark keeps the Dementors at bay during our escape missions."

"You … you're a traitor?" asked Draco.

Pansy smirked. "You're one to talk. Harboring Granger, Draco? *Really*?" She moved her eyes over to Hermione and stared at her coldly. "Theo put on quite a show for you. Killed Flint. Almost got Rodolphus too, barely missed before everyone started firing hexes at him."

"He's Imperiused," said Draco. "You had better make sure -"

"I'll let the Dark Lord know," she said.

Draco's nostrils flared at her. He turned to Hermione. "Are you sure you want to trust these people?"

Hermione began scanning them all, her eyes stopping on Pansy for a moment. As much as she hated her, she could not convince herself that she was lying about being a traitor. Theo had told her once how Pansy was forced to become a Death Eater by her father, just like him. And if Pansy was anything like Theo …

"We don't have much of a choice," said Hermione, looking up at Draco. "I took a chance when I let you help me, and I think I have to do it again."

Draco took a deep breath and forced himself to nod.

"So we're going then?" asked Blaise.

"Yes," said Draco.

"All right! Let's get this party start -"

"Hold on," said Pansy, whose eyes were still on Hermione. "I want to talk to Granger." Then they moved to Draco. "*Alone.*"

Draco sneered and stood protectively in front of her. "Like hell you will!"

"It's important," she said. "I'm not going to hurt her, Draco."

"Fuck no -"

"Draco, it's fine," said Hermione, putting a comforting hand on his arm. "We're wasting time here, so just let her talk to me and then we can be on our way."

Draco held his hand out to Pansy. "Give me your wand."

"I need my wand."

"Give me your fucking -"

"Draco, it's fine! If she tries to strike then I will not hesitate to strike back," said Hermione, walking past him and heading out of the compartment. She made sure to shove hard into Pansy's shoulder as she went by her.

"You're as insufferable as I remember," said Pansy, following her out and shutting the compartment door behind them.

"What do you want, Parkinson?" asked Hermione, turning towards her and crossing her arms.

Suddenly, Pansy's entire face changed. She looked pensively towards the ground and sighed. "Look, I … I wanted to apologize for what I did to you all of those years ago. When my …" She gulped. "When my father owned you."

"Apologize?" Hermione repeated, her throat instantly growing raw.

Pansy looked up. "Yes, I … I was young back then. I know it's no excuse, but I really didn't understand that it wasn't your fault. My father … he's a pig. I see that now. A filthy, disgusting, greedy pig, and I have made a point to defy him in any and every way that I can."

"I see," said Hermione, her arms falling to her sides.

"Becoming a Death Eater, it … changes people. Mostly for the worst, but not always."

Hermione nodded, and glanced towards the door Draco was behind. He had definitely changed for the better.

"Lift your shirt."

Hermione's head whipped back towards Pansy as her eyes widened. "*What*?"

"Lift your shirt, Granger. Those scars I gave you. They can only be removed by the wand that cast them." Pansy took her wand out of her pocket and held it up. "I have the same one."

Hermione's lip began to quiver as she tried to nod her head, unsure if she did it

successfully. She moved her cloak aside and lifted her jumper with shaky hands. Pansy stepped forward and pressed her wand to the largest scar. She concentrated hard on it, and Hermione watched as the pink mark slowly began to suck back into it. She whimpered, bringing one hand up to her mouth to try and hold it in.

"Tell me the truth, Granger," Pansy asked as she worked. "Was it you who sent me that owl?"

Eyes still focused on the disappearing scars, Hermione nodded and quietly said, "Yes."

Pansy smiled lightly. "I thought at the time that it didn't sound like him, but I just couldn't figure out who else would have gone to the trouble." She glanced up and raised an eyebrow. "Jealous?"

Hermione lowered her hand and smirked. "Far less than you are now."

Pansy bit her cheek and looked back at her wand.

Before long every last one of those cursed scars was gone. Instant relief spread throughout Hermione's body as it let go of the constant pain she had become so accustomed to.

Pansy lowered her wand, looked sadly at her and said, "Sorry you had to have those for so long."

Hermione bit her lip to hold in more tears and nodded.

"We don't have much time," said Pansy as she reopened the compartment door. "We're ready!"

"Excellent," said Blaise. He went behind the counter and ducked out of view. There was a loud bang. "Let's go!" called his voice as it seemed to be getting more distant. Daphne went behind the counter and also disappeared.

Draco pushed past Pansy to get to Hermione and put an arm around her waist. He lifted his free hand to wipe the tears from her eyes. "Are you all right?"

Hermione nodded and smiled. "Let's just go."

He nodded back and kissed her forehead. Pansy tried not to stare as Draco took Hermione's hand, but it was hard not to. It was one thing to suspect a relationship between the two of them, but seeing it happen with her own eyes was something

different entirely.

Forcing herself to tear her eyes away from them, Pansy went into a tall cabinet and pulled out a broom.

"What is that for?" asked Draco.

"For when I join the search for you," she answered, putting it into a pouch tied to her hip that must have had an Undetectable Extension Charm placed on it. "I'm sure it will be going strong by the time we get out there."

Draco cocked his head. "You've *really* been doing this for years?"

"I have," she answered. "You've hidden your betrayal by staying close to the Dark Lord's side, Draco, and I've hidden mine by being as insignificant as possible. He and the other Death Eaters have no idea where I am right now, *and* none of them care. Sometimes, it's best just to stay hidden in the shadows."

"Are you all coming?" asked Daphne, poking her head up from somewhere behind the counter.

Pansy ran over first, and she and Daphne disappeared. Draco pulled Hermione over and saw the others had all entered a trap door with a dark, stone staircase. They followed it down, a little curious as to how they did not just exit the train and end up beneath it outside.

When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Blaise was performing a spell on a gray stone wall. Daphne turned and smiled at them. "We've created a bit of a magical maze down here. Hope you're ready for it."

Blaise finished his spell and pressed the tip of his wand to the wall, causing it to push open. He took Daphne's hand and the two of them headed through with Pansy just behind him. It was obvious that they were used to this.

Draco and Hermione hung back a little, both looking over their shoulders skeptically as the stone wall closed behind them. Draco clutched tightly onto his wand, knowing very well that, if they made it out of the city alive, this would be the last time he was allowed to use it. He kept it steadily aimed at Blaise, Daphne and Pansy's backs.

"Honestly, Draco, we were friends for years and you really trust me so little?" asked Blaise, looking back at him.

"I don't trust anyone," answered Draco.

"What a sad way to live," said Blaise, turning back around.

Draco eyed the hand that was not holding onto Daphne's, noticing the gold ring he was wearing.

"When did you two get married?" he asked.

"Last year," said Daphne, smiling brightly as she looked over her shoulder. "It was a small ceremony. Just Pansy and two others, but we had been wanting to make it official for a while." She looked back at her husband dotingly and kissed his cheek.

Draco made a noise of disgust.

"No need to be so bloody verbal, Draco, we already know *your* opinions on marriage," said Blaise.

"You know, my sister really *is* out of your league," said Daphne, looking back at them again.

Draco scoffed and squeezed Hermione's hand tighter. He was pretty sure he had already obtained the best girl out there, and if he could get her then no one could possibly be 'out of his league'.

"I am not against marriage," he said.

Blaise, Daphne and Pansy all looked at him and raised their eyebrows. Hermione looked down and avoided their eyes, but Draco was not afraid to meet each and every one of their gazes.

"I am against *arranged* marriage. And marriage during a time of war. If the war ever ends, I have every intention of getting married."

Hermione smiled and glanced at the spot where she could feel the ring grazing against her skin.

"So … How long have you two been, umm … together?" asked Blaise.

"You escaped in September, right Granger?" asked Daphne. "Pansy, isn't that what you said?

Pansy nodded slowly.

"Draco found me three days after I escaped," answered Hermione. "The night before the curfew began."

"Okay … not exactly what I was asking. How long have you two been -?"

"November fourth," they both answered before she could finish.

"Oh, that's sweet. They both remember the exact date," said Blaise. "So what was that then? First kiss? First shag?"

Hermione blushed and quickly began inspecting the walls they were passing.

Blaise smirked. "First shag it is then."

"Are you always this fucking chatty with the people you help escape?" asked Draco with a sneer.

"Merlin, Draco, I was only trying to catch up with an old friend," said Blaise, rolling his eyes. "Can you honestly say you are not the least bit curious about my life these last few years?"

Draco paused. "Mildly," he said.

Blaise smirked again. "Ah, I knew it! I knew you missed me!"

"I have been perfectly fine without your presence in my life, Zabini," said Draco. "But, I admit, I have checked before to make sure you were alive."

"And?" asked Blaise, cocking an eyebrow.

"You were, so I left it at that."

"No 'hello'?"

Draco looked at him very seriously and said, "It was better for you that I didn't."

Blaise looked forward again and they all continued to walk in silence.

When they hit what looked to be a dead-end, Blaise announced, "We're here!" He took three black devices out of his pocket and handed one to Daphne and another to Pansy. He kept the third.

"Are those Muggle walkie-talkies?" asked Hermione, looking at them curiously.

"Yes," answered Blaise. "You-Know-Who and his Death Eaters have never once thought to put up shields against Muggle technology." He smiled. "Not that we're complaining in the least.

The three of them put on headsets and then tested their devices. Everything was in working order.

"Once we head through this wall, we will be in the Underground," explained Blaise. "It is overrun with Dementors and probably Death Eaters and Snatchers, since your escape does not exactly appear to be a secret."

"It definitely isn't," said Pansy.

"Daphne and I will go ahead of you to scout out the best possible route for you to get out of here. You two will stay with Pansy. Your Dark Marks will keep the Dementors off of you, but she knows a clever little trick to keep them off of Granger." Blaise and Pansy looked at each other and smirked.

"And how will you keep the Dementors off of you two?" asked Hermione.

"We just hide in the crevices we've created every time we run across them," said Daphne.

"Pansy will stay with you until you get outside, which is where Daphne and I will meet back up with you. I'm going to explain the next part now in case we don't have time later," said Blaise. "When you get out there, you will follow the train tracks for four-hundred meters, until you see a hole in the fence to your left. Go through that hole and you will be in a field. It's wide-open and you *will* be spotted, if you haven't been already."

"And don't waste your time trying to use a Disillusionment Charm on yourselves, because it won't work," added Daphne. "The entire area up there has shields put up that stops any sort of protection magic. If a spell flies at you then you better bloody dodge it."

"When you get across the field, you will enter a patch of trees. About fifty meters through them is the city line, and you will be able to Apparate," said Blaise.

"Also, Disillusionment Charms come into effect once you enter the trees, but it won't do either of you much good since you're already going to have quite a few people on your tail," said Daphne. "But Blaise and I have robes hidden at the end of the tunnel. They will disguise us as Death Eaters but are actually invisibility cloaks, so we will be there helping you in any way we can."

Draco and Hermione were both staring at them, wide-eyed and mouths agape.

"Well … *this* isn't going to be a complete disaster," said Draco. He glanced

sideways at Hermione, who looked incredibly nervous

Blaise smirked. "Well, it really would have been better if you came to us *before* you were found out, but what's done is done. No use fretting over it."

"If it were anyone else, I might worry, but you two have both been known to get yourself out of some rather sticky situations. You'll be fine," said Daphne. "Just move fast."

There was a pause.

"We need a moment," said Draco, pulling Hermione a few feet back.

He positioned her in front of him and took both of her hands in his. He turned his head to see the other three all watching them. He twirled his finger and they all said, "Oh!" and turned around.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked, once they were quasi-alone. "We could always just go back and hide with Andromeda. They won't find us there."

Hermione bit her lip and thought about this for a moment. But she quickly shook her head. "No, we can't, Draco. We can't put them at risk like that. And, if the Death Eaters don't see us leaving, they'll know we're still hiding in the city. They will put up more restrictions, making it impossible for us to ever escape. This is our one-shot and I think we should take it."

Draco's hands tensed in hers as he stared down at her with an unreadable expression.

"It's time, Draco," said Hermione, trying hard to smile as she gave his hands a squeeze.

Draco nodded slowly. "You're right."

"Are you regretting coming with me already?" she asked, looking at him with sad eyes.

"No," he said. "But it would be easier for you to get out if I gave myself up."

"That would not be easier, Draco. If you gave yourself up then I could never just leave."

"I know. I've called you on your stubbornness before." Draco smiled.

Hermione smiled back. "You're worse."

"If I were worse then I wouldn't be here right now."

"I was going to cave," said Hermione.

"I know," said Draco, reaching out and stroking her cheek. "But I'm happy you didn't." He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss. Then he pulled her to him and breathed her in before asking, "Are you ready?"

Hermione nodded against him.

"Okay, Zabini," said Draco, pulling away from her and retaking her hand.

Blaise, Daphne and Pansy all turned back around.

"Pansy, muffle your ears for a moment, will you?"

Pansy nodded and used a wand Draco did not recognize to cast a spell on herself. She turned so she could not see their mouths.

"We feel it's important to keep certain secrets from her," said Daphne. "Just in case."

Draco nodded.

"The rumor right now is that the resistance's headquarters is currently stationed in the forest near Hogwarts," said Blaise. "I'm not sure which forest, but they move often, so I suggest you get there as quickly as you can to scope things out."

"I wouldn't head there straightaway, though," said Daphne. "There are a ton of Snatchers stationed there and, with all of the students returning from the Christmas holiday, there will be even more people than usual."

Draco nodded again.

Daphne grabbed Pansy's shoulder and let her know it was all right to remove the spell.

"Well, this is it," said Blaise, half-turning towards the wall. He paused and looked back at Draco. "I'll say good luck now, Draco. Maybe, if we're all still kicking when this bloody war is over -"

"We'll have a drink Slytherin style?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow. He

smirked. "Sure, Zabini. Just as long as you don't sing that bloody song I made up. Theo tried to bring it back recently." He sighed as he thought of Theo. He really hoped he was all right.

"Oh, you mean this one?" Blaise cleared his throat. "*Oh Slytherin, the house of those, pureblooded, great and cunning! While the mead and firewhiskey flows, we flee school without the running*!"

"Shut it," Draco said sternly.

Blaise laughed and turned the rest of the way towards the wall. He moved his wand against it, casting another spell that caused it to push open.

Blaise ran through the opening first.

"See you on the other side!" said Daphne with a wave before following him through.

Draco and Hermione looked at Pansy and waited for the go-ahead. She was quiet for a moment, but once they heard mumbling coming from her ear, she looked at them and said, "Let's go."

They all walked through the open wall, Pansy in the lead. It shut behind them. Draco and Hermione's nerves finally hit them as they realized they were not hidden anymore. They were now out in the open where anyone could catch them. The Underground was a dangerous place. Anyone could be lurking in its depths. Enemies. Allies. Though, at this point, it was hard to differentiate between the two.

"*Pansy, avoid the east tunnel. There is a swarm of maybe twenty Dementors over here and they're spreading out quickly*," said Blaise's voice through Pansy's headset. "*Over.*"

"Okay," she answered. "Daphne, how does it look to the west? Over."

"*No good. Stick north for now. I'm circling back around to check it out. Over.*"

"*Lumos*," said Pansy as the tunnel seemed to be getting darker. She held her wand out in front of her, showing three tunnels heading in different directions. She headed for the one straight ahead.

"*About three Dementors from the swarm are headed that way, Pans. Be prepared. Over.*"

"You even know the lingo for those things?" asked Hermione, sounding mildly impressed.

"Blaise has a weird obsession with Muggle action movies," answered Pansy. "He told us we have to say it or we won't be allowed to play with his toys."

"Typical fucking Zabini. He never was a good sharer," said Draco with a smirk. He paused. "What is an '*action movie*'?"

"I'll explain it later," said Hermione as Pansy began to pick up her pace. They hurried after her, but Draco was still pretty wounded from all of the torture he had endured. "Are you all right?"

Pansy slowed and glanced back at them.

"Yes," he said. "I'll be fine. Astoria gave me some house-elf healing remedy earlier and it's really made my insides hurt less."

"Astoria did?" asked Hermione, glancing sideways at him.

"For me *and* Theo," he said. "She was just being nice."

"Mmhmm," she said, now glancing elsewhere.

"Oh, come on. You're not going to be jealous over a little Healing Potion, are you? You know she only gave it to me because she wanted to give it to Theo. I'm not the one she shagged."

"Astoria *shagged* Theo?" asked Pansy, turning around as her mouth fell open. "Don't tell Daphne. She'll bloody kill him."

"It's not jealousy Draco. I just don't like the way she has attached herself to you. *Or* him," said Hermione.

"Why not him?" he asked.

"He's taken."

Draco scrunched his nose. "Not exactl -"

"He's *taken*, Draco," she said sternly. "And it really is time for you to accept that."

Draco grunted. "Oh, bloody hell."

"Theo's taken?" asked Pansy, cocking an eyebrow. "By who?"

Before anyone could answer - or not answer, since neither Draco nor Hermione planned on giving her a straight one - a weird whistling howl sounded up ahead. Pansy whipped back around and held out her wand. They could all just make out three swaying figures, their outlines slightly denser than the darkness around them.

Pansy pulled up her sleeve and showed off her dark mark. Then she took her wand and touched the lit point right to it. Draco stopped fast and cringed, pulling Hermione into him protectively since he was positive Pansy had just betrayed them. But then the mark lit up and shot at the Dementors, sending them flying off in the same steady pace through a tunnel to the left.

"What the fuck was that?" asked Draco once they were gone. He loosened his grip on Hermione and they all began walking again.

"One time, when I was on a mission with Bellatrix, I saw her do that to keep the Dementors away from the prisoners we had captured," explained Pansy. "She wouldn't tell me anything about it, so I started experimenting with it whenever I came down here to explore the tunnels. It turns out all you need is '*Lumos*'. I bet she just thinks she's so clever keeping secrets like this from the rest of us."

"Yes, well, she's a bitch," said Draco, plain and simple. "Seriously, Parkinson, *when* did you start helping with all of this?"

"I don't know," she said. "It was Daphne and Blaise's idea. They just asked me if I wanted in and I said yes. Is that *really* so hard to believe?"

"Yes," he said truthfully.

Draco and Hermione were walking fairly close to Pansy now and, even in the dark, he could see that she looked hurt.

"I hate being a Death Eater, Draco. You *know* that," she said.

"I do," he said.

"Personally, I think *you* betraying the Dark Lord and shagging Granger is a bit more shocking."

Draco smirked. "Well, you know me. I *live* to shock."

"*Pansy, stop heading north!*" said the frantic voice of Daphne in her ear.

"*Snatchers have entered the Underground. Over.*"

"*The east is clear now,*" said Blaise. "*There will be a few Dementors up ahead but nothing you can't handle. Over.*"

"Got it. Over."

Pansy immediately darted to the right and felt along the wall until she found a stone protruding out of it. She pressed it to reveal a narrow opening. It was so thin that they had to shimmy through it, the opening shutting behind them just as voices started to echo down the tunnels.

"We shouldn't talk anymore," whispered Pansy as they moved through the narrow space. "Not if Snatchers are here now."

They came out in a small opening where several people sat around a fire, warming their hands. Draco and Hermione stopped and froze, but Pansy walked right past them.

"'Ey, Pansy! What you bring us tonight?" asked one of them.

"Nothing tonight, Fender. On a mission." Pansy turned back around and beckoned Draco and Hermione forward. "No need to worry. They're just bloody Muggles."

Draco and Hermione slowly stepped out of the passageway and into the opening.

"We got a couple of wanted criminals tonight, boys, so Snatchers and Dementors are on full alert. Make sure you keep it down," she ordered.

The men all laughed.

"*Really*? These blokes?" said Fender. "I could snap the girl in half with just my thumb, and the blond, angel boy don't look like he'd take much more effort."

"Angel boy?" repeated Draco with great offense. "I'll have you know that I was the top wizard in my year and -"

"Draco, he's *hardly* worth the effort," said Pansy, grabbing his wrist and pulling him and Hermione along.

"One o' these days, you're going to give in an' marry me, Pansy!"

"Keep dreaming, Fender!"

"*Pansy, the east is all clear. If you hurry, you might be able to make it out before more Snatchers head this way. Over,*" said Blaise.

"We're coming through now. Over," responded Pansy.

They headed through another narrow passageway and came out in tunnels that looked exactly the same as the ones before. Draco had to wonder how they never got turned around in this place.

Pansy cast a spell on all of their feet to keep them silent and began running along the side of the train tracks. The tunnels ahead were lit with the faint light of enchanted candles that did not make a lot of sense. Then shadows appeared on the walls in the shape of several humans' silhouettes. Pansy grabbed Draco and Hermione, cast a spell on the wall right beside them and shoved them into a small opening. A few seconds later, several Snatchers walked around the corner, laughing.

Pansy took a deep breath and stepped forward confidently. "Excuse me!"

All of their heads snapped in her direction. There were gasps all around.

"What's with all the poppycock?" she demanded.

"M-madam," one of the Snatchers mumbled. "We weren't doing nothin'."

"Well, *obviously*," she scoffed. "The Dark Lord would not be pleased to hear you are down here gallivanting around when we're in the middle of a time crisis! *Get moving*!" she ordered.

"Y-yes, Madam," they all said before running off.

"And make sure to separate yourselves!" she called after them. "We need to cover as much ground as possible!"

"Yes, Madam!" they all called over their shoulders at her.

Once they were gone, Pansy sighed in relief and went to the wall Draco and Hermione were hidden behind. She opened it.

"Their numbers are growing. We don't have much longer to get you out of here before escape becomes impossible."

Draco and Hermione nodded.

They took off running again, their legs carrying them faster than before. Pansy guided them to the end of the tunnel but, instead of leading them down another one, she cast a spell on the wall with the enchanted candles, causing it to open and reveal a tall staircase.

The three of them ran inside and the wall shut quickly behind them. Pansy, Draco and Hermione ran up the stairs, not stopping, not slowing even after they got to the top.

"We're up! Over!" she said into her headset.

"*All's clear up here,*" said Daphne. "*But Death Eaters are beginning to swarm near the barrier. Over.*"

Pansy kept running, urging them forward, twisting and turning down every corner until they came to a wide opening with train tracks leading out of it. Daphne and Blaise were standing near it.

"I have to say, this is the most exciting mission we've ever been on!" exclaimed Blaise as he and Daphne took off their headsets. Pansy did the same and took the walkie-talkies from the other two, stuffing them into her pouch before pulling out her broom.

Daphne went over to the wall and traced a pattern with her wand before opening it like a drawer. She pulled out two robes and she and Blaise began dressing in them.

"Pansy, you go first," ordered Blaise.

Pansy nodded before looking back at Draco and Hermione. "Well, this is goodbye then. Good luck. Both of you."

She began moving towards the exit. Draco bit his cheek, looking torn for a moment before locking eyes with Hermione. She sighed and nodded towards Pansy.

Draco grunted. "Pansy, wait!"

Pansy turned back around.

Draco let go of Hermione's hand for the first time since they left his flat and stepped forward. "Look," he said. "Sorry, for, uhh … Well, for being such a prick, I suppose. It just comes so damn naturally."

Pansy smirked. "I know. And don't worry, I …" She glanced back at Hermione. "I

get it. We've all done things we're ashamed of."

Draco nodded. "Be careful. The Dark Lord knows that you're loyal to me."

"I will," she said. "And don't worry. I'll take care of Theo."

Draco nodded again.

"You better get the fuck out, Draco. I don't much feel like mourning your death anytime soon."

Before he could answer, Pansy turned back around and took off running. She mounted her broom a few meters out and took off into the air. Only moments later, Draco could see her flying around with several other Death Eaters.

"Stay near the edge, Draco," said Blaise. "Keep out of sight until you hit the field, if you can."

Draco looked back at him and nodded. Then he stepped forward and held out his hand. "Thanks, Blaise."

"Aw, you're calling me Blaise again." Blaise took Draco's hand and shook.

Draco squeezed hard and pulled Blaise close. "If something happens out there," he whispered, "and I have to give myself up, you make sure she gets out. Don't let her come back for me."

"Got it," said Blaise, giving him a pat on the back.

"Also my aunt, not the sadistic psychopath but the good one, Andromeda, she and her grandson are in hiding in the city with four other resistance members. They're at the Weasleys' shop in Diagon Alley and they won't leave unless it's all together. If you can, get them out."

Blaise smirked. "I gotta hand it to you, Draco. Being You-Know-Who's top dog for all this time. You even had me fooled."

"That was the point," said Draco, smirking back at him.

Hermione suddenly came up beside him and retook his hand.

"Draco, it's time for us to go. We've delayed this for long enough," she said, her palm sweating against his.

"Right," said Draco, the reality of everything he was doing finally hitting him. "This is real. Are you ready for this?"

"No," Hermione said truthfully. "But when will I ever be?"

"If you two want to kiss for good luck, we won't stop you," said Daphne, watching them with a fixed fascination. Blaise looked just as intrigued.

"You two are fucking creepy," said Draco. But, still, he ignored them and leaned forward, giving Hermione a soft kiss and pressing his forehead against hers. He just stood there for a moment, breathing her in before he finally said, "Let's go."

Draco began tugging on her hand before either of them had a chance to be frightened and pull back. They stayed hidden in their black hoods, pressing themselves firmly against the wall as they moved in the shadows.

The moonlight let them see where Death Eaters were. Three of them were nearby, four if they counted Pansy, all keeping their eyes closely on the perimeter. None even thought to be looking in whatever direction they might be coming from, so they had that to their advantage.

Draco and Hermione's footsteps were still silent as they moved and, before long, they had gone one-hundred meters, then two-hundred, three-hundred …

"There they bloody are!" someone shouted from a broom above them. They were pointing and someone else quickly lit up the sky with the Dark Mark. *Shit.* It was only a matter of moments before Voldemort was joining them.

A Stunning Spell shot at them but they easily dodged it. Three-hundred fifty meters. Three-hundred eighty.

"There's the hole!" shouted Hermione, pointing at a round spot, darker than the rest of the fence. They sprinted up to it and Draco helped Hermione through first before following after. He took her hand again and kept her close while hexes and curses flew at them from every which direction.

A broom zoomed down close to them and tried to grab at Draco's cloak. They both ducked, Draco throwing himself protectively over her until the Death Eater passed. Then they took off running again.

"Give it up, Malfoy! You can't bloody escape the Dark Lord!" shouted what he recognized as Yaxley's voice.

There were swishing sounds all around, and Draco and Hermione knew more

Death Eaters were arriving.

"Give up the Mudblood, Nephew!" shouted Bellatrix as she shot the Cruciatus Curse at them.

Draco and Hermione dodged in opposite directions, but quickly scrambled to get back to each other. They rolled together to dodge another hex and Hermione shot up, stunning the Death Eater who had cast it and sending them and their broom crashing into the ground.

Draco and Hermione were back on their feet and running while the Death Eaters began landing all around them. Pansy cast a Stunning Spell that shot right by Hermione's ear, 'accidentally' hitting the Death Eater directly in front of them.

Draco wanted to aim to kill, but the majority of the Death Eaters had their masks on and he did not want to hit Astoria or Goyle by accident, since they were, undoubtedly, here.

"Get the Mudblood!" ordered Bellatrix. "But Draco is mine."

Bellatrix marched forward and Draco immediately shot a Killing Curse at her. It just missed. He had sent her on a million missions that should have ended in her death but, for some reason, she always escaped it. Draco knew there was dark magic involved, but he did not know what it was.

Bellatrix sent a Stunning Spell flying at him and he dodged it, having to let go of Hermione's hand. He jumped back up and shot one right back at her. She lifted her wand to block it, obviously not knowing about the shields in place out here since patrolling was beneath her. Or so she felt. Of course, Draco could not say anything, because he did not know either.

"Sleep well, auntie dearest," he said as she hit the ground.

When Draco turned back around, Yaxley had grabbed Hermione from behind. He lifted his wand to save her but, before it was necessary, she had a lock on his arm and was flipping him like Theo had taught her. When he was down, she shot a Killing Curse at him and shouted, "Bloody bastard!" giving his dead body a kick.

While Hermione was distracted, Rowle and Dolohov tried to come at her from both sides. Draco shot Killing Curses at them and, when they dodged, he grabbed back onto Hermione's hand and dragged her as fast as he could towards the trees.

"Draco, stop running!" he heard a familiar, raspy voice say behind him. Voldemort. "Return to me now and I will spare the Mudblood!"

Draco's running slowed.

"Draco, no!" shouted Hermione, pulling hard on his hand as they finally entered the trees.

Draco looked over his shoulder. Voldemort was flying right towards them.

"*Crucio*!" shouted a Death Eater who he was positive was Pansy's father. It was aimed at Hermione. Draco shoved her out of the way and took the curse for himself.

"DRACO!" screamed Hermione as he fell hard onto the ground. She tried to run back for him but an invisible force pushed her in the opposite direction. "No!"

Draco forced his eyes open through the pain and saw Voldemort getting closer, his hand outstretched and ready to grab at him. Stuart Parkinson stood above him. He moved to pull Draco to his feet, but, before he could, someone stunned him and he fell forward.

And then Draco was being grabbed by the cloak and pulled to his feet. "I've *never* failed to get one out yet," said the voice of Blaise as Draco was thrown far into the trees. He landed right near Hermione, who grabbed his hand and started pulling.

"Stop, Mudblood!" screamed the voice of Voldemort.

Draco looked up just in time to see his hand grab in front of his eyes, but Hermione had his arm and, before the Dark Lord, could make contact, the trees, the Death Eaters, the city of London were all being sucked away, everything going black as he felt like he was being pressed inward from every direction at once.

And then, in a matter of moments, the world became light again. Draco felt cold as he landed in something white. Snow.

Hermione moved into his line of sight. "Draco?" she said quietly as soft flakes fell into her hair, making it frizz almost instantly.

Draco reached up and ran his fingers through it. "Is this going to be a problem?" he asked.

Hermione smiled and gave his chest a light smack. "Arse."

"So …" he said, moving his fingers to her cheek. "We're out?"

There were tears of joy in her eyes as she nodded enthusiastically. "We're out."

Draco moved his hand behind her head and pulled her down so her lips met his. They were out. They had gone up against a swarm of Death Eaters and still they made it.

Draco could not remember the last time he had felt like this. It was as if a huge weight he had not even known was there was lifted off of him. Free. He was free. For the first time in almost five years, he and Hermione were truly free.

# Chapter 26: Tomorrow Never Knows

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"Where are we?" asked Draco as he sat himself up, his hands stinging as they gripped the snow.

"Godric's Hollow," answered Hermione, holding steadily onto his arm so he would not strain himself. "I know you and the other Death Eaters ran the resistance out of here, but I figured it would not hurt to see if they returned."

Looking around, Draco saw that they were in the center of the village square. "We should move out of view. They don't like me very much here."

"Yes, of course," said Hermione, putting his arm around her shoulders and helping him to his feet.

"Granger, I'm fine."

"You're still recovering, Draco. You shouldn't have taken that curse for me. Just one doesn't do much to me anymore."

"You've been tortured enough in your life, Granger," he said. "I think you're done."

"Let's hope," she said, helping him as he limped out of the square.

Unsure of where to go, Draco and Hermione walked over to the forest. Hermione helped Draco sit against a tree and then began looking around.

"Do you think we should setup camp?" she asked.

"I suppose we might as well," said Draco, already trying to stand.

Hermione quickly held him down. "No, Draco. I'll go find a clearing. You stay here."

"We shouldn't separate -"

"It's fine," she said. "They're not going to come here looking for us tonight."

"I would still feel better if we stayed together."

"I won't go far. And, if you need me -" Hermione took out her wand and waved it, creating a small, blue bird. She put it on Draco's shoulder. "- send him to me."

Hermione began to stand, but Draco grabbed her wrist and pulled her back towards him. He stroked her cheek and gave her a tender kiss. "Don't be gone long," he said.

Hermione smiled and nodded. "I'm really glad you're here." She kissed him again before running off into the trees.

As soon as she was gone, Draco closed his eyes and pressed his head back against the tree. He sighed deeply. He knew he should not have come. It was selfish of him to put her in this sort of danger, but he just could not bear the thought of losing her. Not yet. Now, all he could do was help her find the resistance, and hope that they would not kill him on the spot.

Hearing a faint giggle that sounded a bit like bells, Draco opened his eyes again. He screamed as he came face to face with a beautiful, translucent woman.

"*You*," he said, recognizing the ghost from before. It was the same one who had led him to Hermione's ring.

"Is she the one?" the ghost woman asked in a spooky yet beautiful voice that sounded like music.

"What?" he asked, pursing his eyebrows.

She giggled again. "The one you love."

Draco's jaw fell slightly.

"I watched you in the forest when you were here before. When you killed that

horrible woman who had done such awful things to the girl you loved." She smiled. "I could see it in your eyes."

"Oh," said Draco, looking in the direction Hermione had gone. He gulped. "Yes. She's the one."

Her smile widened. That is, until she began scanning Draco up and down, noticing how wounded he was. "Are you in trouble?" she asked.

Draco sighed. He nodded slowly.

"Well, then you should not be out in the open like this."

"She is setting up camp," he said.

"Certainly not!" shouted the ghost in her haunting voice that made the wind rattle. "You are hurt. You must sleep inside."

"That isn't exactly an option."

"Of course it is," she said. "I will show you where the resistance stays whenever they are here."

She touched the bird on Draco's shoulder, sending it flying off to find Hermione.

Draco looked after it. "How did you do that?" he asked.

The ghost smiled. "I still have a little magic left in me."

It was not long before Hermione came running through the trees. "Draco, what is it?" she asked worriedly.

Draco nodded towards the ghost.

"Oh!" said Hermione, looking surprised. "Hello."

The ghost floated up to her and held out her left hand. "A pleasure."

Hermione stared at the hand curiously, unsure of how she was supposed to go about this. She lifted her own and tried to pretend she was gripping something solid.

The ghost giggled. Then she began inspecting Hermione's outstretched hand. "Where's the ring?" she asked.

Hermione squinted for a moment before catching on. "Oh, you're *that* ghost," she said. She moved her cloak aside and pulled the chain out of her jumper. "It's right here."

"Why are you wearing it there?" asked the ghost as she ran her fingers through it.

"We're waiting until after the war," said Draco, trying to push himself to his feet. Hermione hurried over and helped him up.

"To get engaged?"

Draco smirked. "Why were you so sure I was going to use it as an engagement ring?"

"I told you. I saw it in your eyes," she said, smirking back. "Personally, I think it's silly to wait but, I suppose, it's your choice. Be careful with that, though. It's a family heirloom, you know."

"It is?" said Hermione, looking down at it. "Then why have you given it up? Surely, someone in your family should hold onto -"

"There is no one left in my family," she said sadly. "The ring was supposed to be mine one day, but I died before I ever had the chance to wear it, so it went to my little sister instead. The last of her family was killed two years ago by Death Eaters in this very town."

Draco shamefully cast his eyes to the ground.

"Don't worry, it wasn't you. You weren't here that time."

"You've seen me before?" asked Draco, looking back up at her.

"I have," she said with a smile. "I have always seen you. I could tell from the beginning that you were different and, last time, you proved it to me."

"What's your name?" asked Hermione.

"It's Wendy," she answered. "And yours?"

"This is Draco, and I'm …" Hermione paused. How was she supposed to introduce herself? She could not say Hermione and using her surname just seemed so informal. "I'm Allie," she finally said, deciding that her fake name was as good as any.

"We shouldn't be standing out here like this," said Draco, looking all around. "Wendy, you said you had somewhere we could go?"

"Yes," she said. "Follow me."

Wendy floated back towards the town of Godric's Hollow. Draco and Hermione followed her, Hermione helping him the entire way. It was not that the Cruciatus Curse that had hit him was particularly powerful, but it had definitely shifted something, like all of the healing he had done over the last few days had been a waste. Everything was back in its wrong place and he ached horribly.

Wendy led them into the graveyard, where Draco caught sight of the tree he had first seen her at. Where he had found the ring.

"What was the ring doing out here, Wendy?" he asked.

"Some horrid little thief tried to steal it from my family's home six months ago. I gave him the fright of his life when he tried to escape and he dropped it right there. I had been keeping an eye on it ever since."

"Are you sure you're all right giving something so precious to us?" asked Hermione.

"Absolutely," said Wendy, turning around and floating backwards. "I mean, what am I going to do with it? Besides …" She swept towards them and stopped directly in front of Hermione. She smiled. "It matches your eyes."

Wendy turned back around and floated swiftly towards a large tomb. "Here we are," she said, stopping beside it. When Draco and Hermione got there, she pointed at a stone with a carving of a Phoenix on it. "Press here."

Draco reached out and pressed the stone. There was a rumbling before the steps leading up to the tomb opened up so that they were leading downward into a dark abyss. Wendy floated down first.

Draco and Hermione looked at each other skeptically.

"She says this is where the resistance hides," he said.

"It seems appropriate, I suppose," said Hermione, looking down. "Let's go."

Hermione helped Draco down the stairs. When the opening closed above them, an array of enchanted candles started burning and lit up the stone corridor they were now in with an orange glow.

They began walking down it and turned to the left when the corridor ended. Here, they were met with an abundance of doors. Leaving Draco standing where he was, Hermione went over and opened the first one.

"It's a bedroom," she said, looking back at him. "This one has about ten beds in it."

"Yes," said Wendy, suddenly reappearing beside Draco. "Sometimes, a lot of them have to stay here. Follow me and I will show you where the best room is." She began zooming down the corridor.

Hermione looked back at Draco and frowned. As he tried to move on his own, it was obvious he was in a lot of pain. "Maybe I should levitate you the rest of the way," she said, going back over to him.

"No, Granger. I'm fine," said Draco. He reached his arm out. "Just give me your shoulder."

Hermione sighed but still did as she was told. They walked slowly down the corridor and did not stop until Wendy flew out of one of the doors.

"This one," she said before disappearing again.

Hermione opened the door and she and Draco went inside. It was a simple room, but it had a single king-sized bed with a red comforter and gold sheets.

"How very Gryffindor," said Draco.

"It's meant to be the colors of a Phoenix," said Wendy.

"It's perfect," said Hermione, guiding Draco over to the bed and laying him down on it. When she tried to get up after, he pulled her back and kissed her.

Hermione smiled down at him before climbing off of the bed.

"You both look exhausted," said Wendy. "I suppose I should leave you to it then, but I will be back in the morning to check on you."

"Thank you, Wendy," said Hermione before the ghost floated out of the room.

"Alone at last," said Draco, holding out his arms. "Shall we shag now?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, Draco. There will be no shagging tonight."

"Why not?" he whined.

"Because *you* need to heal. We're on the run now and we need you in tiptop condition."

"Well, without a bloody shag, I assure you that's not going to happen."

"Please, Draco, just take this seriously?" said Hermione with a sigh. She put her bag down on the simple dresser and began searching through it.

While watching her, Draco noticed for the first time how pale she looked. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine."

Draco frowned. "Don't lie to me, Granger."

"I'm not -"

"And you're lying again."

Hermione pulled a bottle filled with a green liquid out of her bag. She opened it and waved her wand to heat it up before walking back over to Draco. "Drink this," she ordered.

"Not until you tell me -"

"Please, Draco?"

Draco narrowed his eyes and said, "You're lucky that I love you." He took the potion and swallowed it down.

Once it was all gone, Hermione took the empty bottle and put it on the nightstand. "I really am fine, Draco. I'm just … scared," she said. "I know it was selfish of me to ask you to come, but I …" She gulped. "I couldn't bear the thought of leaving you behind."

"You think *you're* the selfish one?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yes," she said as she unfastened his cloak and pulled it off of him. "You would be safer if I had put the Imperius Curse on you and left you there. Not to mention Theo, Bronson and Quigley …"

"They'll be fine," said Draco. "I put shields around Bronson and Quigley's minds years ago. If anyone tries Legilimency on them, they won't see anything but two normal, slightly annoying gits. And Theo … I trust Pansy to take care of him."

Hermione nodded and pulled off his jumper and the shirt beneath it. All had been soaked in the snow. Then she yanked off his trousers.

"Love, you really have to stop doing that if you're not going to follow through."

Hermione smirked. "I'll grab you some dry clothes."

She went back over to her bag and pulled out some flannel pajamas he had never seen before.

"Where did you get those bloody things?"

"Bronson bought them for me. I know you prefer to sleep in just your boxer shorts, but I figured some nights might be colder than others."

"They're hideous."

"This isn't a fashion show, Draco. We're just going to sleep," she said sternly as she began to dress him.

As soon as that was done, Hermione pulled the covers over him. She kissed his cheek before getting up and taking off her own cloak. She hung it over a chair. Draco watched closely as she began to change, his eyes freezing on her side when she pulled her jumper off.

"Granger, come here," he ordered.

Hermione pulled on her pajama top and hurried over to him. "What is it?"

Draco reached out and lifted her top. Then he stroked her side, where her large pink scar used to be. "Where is it?" he asked.

"Oh." Hermione looked down and touched her flawless skin. She had almost forgotten with everything else that had happened that night, but now she could not help but smile. "Pansy removed the curse."

"When she asked to talk to you alone?"

"Yes. She …" Hermione sighed. "She apologized."

"That still does not make up for having done -"

"I know, Draco," said Hermione, grabbing his hand off of her side and interlacing his fingers with hers. "And I haven't forgiven her. Not entirely. But …" She sighed.

"Shades of gray, right?"

Draco nodded. "Right."

He scooted over in the bed and held up the covers so that she could crawl in next to him. They wrapped their arms around each other and stared into each other's eyes, Hermione stroking Draco's cheek while he ran his fingers through her hair.

"This is it, Granger. Tomorrow we need to come up with a plan to get you back to Potter and Weasley."

Hermione nodded. "We're not traveling tomorrow, though. You need to heal and we're not going anywhere until you are one-hundred percent."

"Seventy-five."

"One-hundred."

"Eighty."

"One-hundred."

"Eighty is perfectly reasonable, Granger. Who knows how long it will be before I'm one-hundred percent again? And we shouldn't be staying in one place for too long."

Hermione frowned. "All right, eighty-five, and not a quarter of a percent lower."

Draco smirked and kissed her forehead. "Deal."

Hermione nuzzled her head into Draco's chest and the two of them began to drift off to sleep, though neither was entirely relaxed. It was hard to be when they had just become two of the most wanted criminals in the entire world.

<p align="center">XXX</p>

Lucius stood in Draco's ruined flat, his mind in a daze as he stared at the photo of them and Narcissa on Draco's first day at Hogwarts. On Platform 9 ¾. He had noticed the last time he was here that his figure had been covered, and now he knew why. *She* had done it. The Mudblood who had first taken his dignity and, now, his son.

"Lucius, tell me again why you came here?" asked Voldemort as he looked curiously at the blood splattered on the walls.

"I saw Draco and Theodore disappear together, my lord. Then when Theodore came back alone, I became worried and thought I would try Draco here."

"And he was here?"

"Yes."

"With the Mudblood?"

Lucius gulped. "Yes." Staring closely at the photo in front of him, he could now see her in it. Young and innocent, running around in the background. He was not sure if she was really there or his mind was just playing tricks on him but, either way, he felt sick. "My lord, I swear, Draco did not seem to be in his right mind. He was not going to go with her until she ordered him to. It *must* be the Imperius Curse."

"Oh, and did she order him to blast my husband's brother into a million pieces, as well?" asked Bellatrix, walking out of Draco's bedroom.

"N-no," said Lucius. "But if he was ordered to protect her and he felt she was being threatened -"

"And, yet, *you're* still alive," she scoffed. "My lord, it looks as if she has been staying in my nephew's bedroom. If you ask me, the two of them must be lovers. We have *all* been suspecting for quite some time that Draco had found himself a woman. Even you."

"My lord, he would nev -"

"That is quite enough, Lucius," said Voldemort, holding up his hand to silence him.

"My lord, I have found something very peculiar," said Macnair, walking in from the balcony. He held up a small, rectangular box and opened it to reveal a bunch of white sticks. "Have you ever seen such a thing before? There are a bunch of half-burned ones out here, as well."

"What, like candles?" asked Bellatrix, going over and inspecting them.

"No, not like candles, Bellatrix," said Voldemort. "Those are a Muggle creation." He sneered. "Dispose of them."

"Yes, my lord," said Macnair, going back outside to blast them to oblivion. Much like Rabastan.

Just then, Rodolphus walked out of Draco's bedroom.

"Find anything of value of hers, *dear* husband?" mocked Bellatrix.

Ignoring her, Rodolphus lifted something. A wand. He held it to his throat. "My wand," he said. "The one she took from me. It was hidden in a secret compartment in the back of a drawer."

"Yes, *dear*, but how about any signs of them shagging? Did you find anything like that in there?"

Rodolphus suddenly grabbed his wife by the throat and slammed her into the wall. "You know *nothing*, dearest!"

"Let her go, Rodolphus," ordered Voldemort.

Rodolphus sneered before letting her fall to a heap on the floor. Bellatrix gasped for air.

"I have seen enough here," said Voldemort. "And I would like to pay young Theodore a visit before it gets too late."

"Yes, my lord," said his four loyal subjects.

Macnair hurried forward and opened the front door for him. Voldemort exited first, followed by Bellatrix and Macnair. Lucius moved to leave, but Rodolphus stepped in front of him and held a fist out towards him. Lucius looked at it curiously for a moment before putting his hand underneath it. Rodolphus dropped a locket into it. Narcissa's locket.

"Looks like your *son* left this behind," said Rodolphus with his wand to his throat.

Lucius clutched it tightly and took a deep breath. "Rodolphus, I swear, Draco would never -"

"And, yet, we both know he did," Rodolphus said coldly before heading out the door. Lucius sighed before following.

Below, Bronson had just arrived home from work and was heading up the stairs to his flat. He was debating going up and seeing Theo, but did not want to smother him, considering he was already skeptical about whatever relationship the two of them had. But he was just so bloody adorable that Bronson found it difficult to back off, even when he knew it was necessary.

Just as he reached his floor, he heard footsteps. Bronson looked up to see the Dark Lord himself walking down the stairs from Draco's flat. He hurried and

pressed himself against the wall so he was not in the way.

Voldemort looked right at him, studying him from head to foot. The woman behind him did the same, holding her chin high and somehow staring down at him even when she was a few stairs lower. Bronson immediately recognized her as Draco's aunt, Bellatrix.

"That's one of the boys Draco and Theodore have been seen with lately, my lord," she said, not even trying to be quiet about it.

"Leave him be," ordered Voldemort. "For now."

Another man Bronson did not recognize walked after them.

Bronson stood there frozen for a moment. Then he heard more footsteps.

He looked back up the stairs to see that prick, the one who owned Fiona, walking down them and looking even angrier than usual. And behind him was Lucius Malfoy … covered in blood.

Bronson kept his eyes on Lucius, unable to tear them away. Noticing this, Lucius took a handkerchief out of his pocket and began wiping at his face.

Even though Bronson tried to fight his fear, it was hard to look completely unaffected when he had no idea whose blood that was. Draco and Hermione were not with them. Theo was not with them. What the hell had happened?

After they were gone, Bronson remained in the hallway, staring dazedly up the staircase, almost afraid to go up there.

"Bronson?"

He slowly turned to see Quigley standing beside him. He had not even heard him arrive home.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Bronson gulped. "Something's happened. You-Know-Who was here. And … and Draco's father. He was covered in blood, Quigs!" shouted Bronson, his eyes beginning to tear. "I … I don't know if they're all right."

Just then, the alarm signaling the curfew went off.

Quigley grabbed Bronson's arm. "Come on. We'll go wait by the mirror, all right?

And, if we don't hear anything, we'll go up there first thing in the morning."

Bronson nodded slowly. He let Quigley guide him inside, but his heart never left that hallway. He had never been more afraid of anything in his life.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"AHHHHHHH!"

Theo cried out in pain as the Dark Lord hit him with another Cruciatus Curse. His body was covered in a cold sweat as he panted for air. His insides hurt. He could not breathe. But, still, he held on, because Draco had held on, and he could do it too.

"Where is Draco?" Voldemort demanded. "Where have he and the Mudblood gone?"

"I … don't know," Theo choked out before coughing up another round of blood onto the cold, stone floor of his cell. His father had been all too happy to put him down here. Bloody bastard.

Theo could feel as Voldemort tried to enter his head with Legilimency again, but Draco had put shields around his head, as well as the Imperius Curse, and they seemed to be solid.

His cell door opened and Bellatrix walked in. She grabbed him by the neck and pried his mouth open, pouring some liquid down his throat. Theo choked on it as she held his head back but, somehow, he managed to swallow.

"It's down, my lord," she said, spitting on Theo before exiting his cell.

"Now, Theodore, please cooperate," said Voldemort, stepping forward and staring at him with his snake-like eyes through the bars. In the dark, they seemed to glow red, making it impossible to miss him, even through Theo's hazy vision. "How long was Draco housing the Mudblood?"

Theo panted as he tried to pull himself up, only managing to get himself on all fours. "I … I do not know what you are talking about, my -"

"*Crucio*!"

"AHHH!" Theo collapsed again as the pain ran through him. "My lord! PLEASE! I do not know anything!"

"Liar!" shouted Bellatrix, hitting him with her own curse before the other one even had a chance to pass.

Lucius stood in the corner next to Quincy, hating the way the other wizard smiled while his son was being tortured.

"You sicken me," spat Lucius, wanting to cover his ears as Theo screamed out again.

Quincy's smile only grew. "I sicken you? At least *my* son did not run away with a Mudblood."

Just then, the door to the basement slammed open and several sets of footsteps could be heard running down the stairs. Within seconds, Pansy, Gregory Goyle and Astoria appeared, all looking greatly distraught.

"My lord, please stop!" pleaded Pansy.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Bellatrix.

Pansy stepped forward and fell to her knees at Voldemort's feet, bowing her head low. "My lord, please. I have known Draco and Theo for a long time. We all have." She looked back at Astoria and Goyle, who she had recruited for this task. They had believed her when she brought up the Imperius Curse and, while both were frightened, they wanted to help. Three would always be more convincing than one. "There is no way they would have done this on their own accord. They both despised Granger in school, for being the filthy Mudblood she is! Please, do not put Theo through another minute of this torture without first checking him for the Imperius Curse. I beg of you."

Astoria tugged on Goyle's arm and the two of them went over to the Dark Lord, also kneeling down and bowing their heads.

Lucius glanced sideways at Quincy and smirked. "Now, wouldn't that be a shock?"

"My lord," said Bellatrix, "there is no reason for us to suspect -"

"Then check him," ordered Voldemort.

"W-what?" she said, her eyes widening. "But, my lord -"

"Do not defy me, Bellatrix. I believe I have had enough of that for one night. Now, check him," he ordered again in a threatening voice.

Bellatrix nodded. "Yes, my lord."

As Bellatrix entered the cell, Voldemort looked down at the three young Death Eaters at his feet and said, "You may stand."

Pansy, Astoria and Goyle all got to their feet, watching worriedly as Bellatrix used her foot to turn Theo off of his stomach and onto his back. He was barely conscious as she pointed her wand at his head, searching to see if the curse was anywhere to be found. And then, there it was.

Bellatrix gulped. "It is here, my lord. Cast with an unfamiliar wand."

"Not Draco's?"

She shook her head. "No, my lord. I know my nephew's wand and this isn't it."

Pansy sighed in relief. Well, that was easy enough.

Voldemort took a deep breath through that snake-like nose of his and turned around. He closed his eyes and slowly said, "Remove it."

"But, my lord, if we do, chances are that his entire memory will be wiped clean."

"Legilimency has not worked. Veritaserum has not worked. While Draco's wand may not have cast the spell, I have no doubt that these shields are his doing."

"Granger was at the top of our class, my lord," said Pansy, who was still standing beside him, closely watching the shallow breathing of Theo. He was hurt pretty horribly. "She is not incapable -"

"She had not touched a wand in over four years," Voldemort said sternly. "There is no way she could have Imperiused one of my top Death Eaters unless she received help."

"Is that so unbelievable, my lord?" said Lucius, stepping forward. "That there are others out there who helped her?"

Voldemort stared coldly at him before swiftly turning back around. "Remove it. Then bring him upstairs to sleep it off. I will deal with him in the morning." Without waiting, Voldemort headed back up the stairs, making sure to slam the door behind him.

"Is he really going to lose his memory?" Astoria asked Pansy as they stood outside the cell, watching.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully.

Bellatrix grunted before pointing her wand at Theo's wand again and going to work on removing the curse.

Suddenly, Theo burst back up, screaming out in pain as she twisted around his mind.

"AHH! Please! Stop! STOOOPPP!"

He began hacking up more blood, choking on it as a strange black smoke exited his head, evaporating the moment it hit the air. And then it was done. Gone.

Theo fell back unconscious as Pansy, Astoria and Goyle ran into the cell.

"Deal with him yourselves," said Bellatrix coldly before leaving the cell and heading up the stairs.

Quincy sneered at his son before doing the same.

Lucius sighed and walked over to the others. "Ms. Greengrass, go and prepare a room for him," he ordered.

The young witch looked up at him and nodded before leaving the basement.

Lucius waved his wand and Theo began levitating. "Perhaps you should go and prepare some Healing Potions, Mr. Goyle."

Goyle stood up and ran off quickly.

"Ms. Parkinson."

Pansy looked up at him.

"What made you so sure Theodore was under the Imperius Curse?"

"Because I know him. Same with Draco," she said.

"Yes, I know Draco too," said Lucius. He lifted his wand and pointed it at Pansy's head. "*Legilimens*!"

Pansy screamed, her eyes closing and her face scrunching up as she tried hard to push him out. But she did not succeed until after he had seen everything he needed. She opened her eyes again, breathing heavily as she looked up at him in horror.

But Lucius did not react the way she expected. He simply turned and began guiding Theo's floating body towards the stairs. "Come along, Ms. Parkinson." Before ascending the stairs, he looked back at her and said, "You and I are going to find a way to make sure no harm comes to my son."

"You're … you're not going to turn me in?" she asked in a strained voice.

"Not tonight," said Lucius, turning back and heading up the stairs.

Pansy stayed there frozen for a moment, mouth agape before she finally managed to stand. Well, this was definitely a day full of surprises. One right after another.

XXX

Hermione lay in Draco's arms, unable to sleep after he had woken her from a terrible nightmare. They were different now, mainly because her greatest fear had changed.

In them, she was forced to watch while Voldemort tortured Draco, Bellatrix casting a spell on her to keep her eyes wide open. The Dark Lord would rip him apart slowly, Draco never taking his eyes off of her, trying to be strong for her. But she was not fooled, because she could always spot the pain behind his eyes.

Looking at his serene face as he slept now, Hermione could not help but reach out and run her fingers across his cheek and through his hair. He was perfect. Just like this.

With a sigh, Hermione sat up and hugged her knees. She could not tell if it was morning yet in this room since they were underground and there were no windows.

Hermione stood up and walked over to her small bag. She shuffled through it as quietly as possible, looking for her clock. While moving her hand throughout the bag, she suddenly came upon something else. A mirror.

Hermione pulled it out and bit her lip. She located her clock and saw that it was three-thirty in the morning. Glancing back at Draco, she could tell by his shallow breathing that he was still fast asleep. She picked up the mirror and tiptoed out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind her.

Looking around, Hermione decided to head into the room across the hall. She walked inside and immediately froze. It was another bedroom with a single king-sized bed and a comforter and sheets in similar colors, but the walls were covered with posters of famous Quidditch players and chocolate frogs were horded in such an abundance that they were poking out of the drawers. Somehow, she just knew

that this was Ron's room when he stayed here.

And then she noticed something else. Walking forward, Hermione saw a photo in a frame on top of the desk. It was of just the two of them, dancing at Bill and Fleur's wedding. One of the last moments they spent together while things were still normal.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione grabbed the photo and slammed it face down. She sat down in a corner on the floor so she would not have to see anything that reminded her of Ron and lifted the mirror. "Baldric Bronson," she said into it.

A moment later, Hermione could see Bronson, who was fast asleep on his sofa while facing the mirror, which must have been propped up.

"Bronson." she said. Nothing. "Bronson." He stirred a little. "BRONSON!"

Bronson suddenly shot up and rolled right off of the sofa. He popped back up a second later and stared into the mirror, blinking several times to focus his eyes. "Her - Granger?"

She nodded.

"Oh, thank Merlin you're all right!"

"Did you have a reason to believe I wasn't?" she asked, feeling nervous.

"Yes! You-Know-Who was here and Malfoy's fucking father came down from his flat drenched in blood!"

"Don't worry," she said. "It was that Death Eater, Rabastan's blood. Draco and I are fine, he just … blew him up a little before we left."

"So … you're gone then?" asked Bronson. He gulped. "You and Malfoy?"

"Who are you bloody talking to?" said the groggy voice of Quigley. Hermione heard some stirring. "Holy shit, is that the mirror? Is it her?"

Bronson looked to his left and nodded.

A moment later, Quigley's head appeared in the mirror. "You're alive!" he shouted in relief.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, we're -"

"Granger?"

Hermione's head whipped up as she pulled the mirror against her chest. Draco was standing in the doorway, arms crossed as he leaned against the doorframe for balance.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"N-nothing!" she said quickly.

"What is that you have in your hand?"

Hermione gulped. *Shit.* "Listen, Draco, don't be mad but -"

"You know I hate it when you start off sentences like that," he said while taking a few careful steps forward.

Hermione frowned and stood. "Draco, you shouldn't be out of bed."

She went over to help him, and Draco took this opportunity to swiftly tear the mirror out of her hands.

"Hey!" she shouted while trying to grab it back.

Draco turned away so she could not get to it and looked in the glass to see the wide eyes of Bronson and Quigley staring back at him.

"Hey, buddy," said Bronson with a wide smile.

"So, mate, I hope you don't mind that I just got a close-up of your girl's breasts, and they are bloody fantastic," said Quigley, giving him the A-OK symbol and a wink.

"You're lucky I'm not there to kick your fucking arse for that!" shouted Draco. "Granger, what is this?"

"It's a … a two-way mirror."

"Fucking obviously!" he snapped. "But why the fuck do you have it?"

Hermione sighed and looked back into it. "Bronson got them for us a while ago. So I could keep him informed if we ever had to make a quick getaway. Which we did."

"Don't be angry, mate," said Bronson. "We already said we'll only ever use them during the hours of the curfew."

Draco took several deep breaths and prepared himself to yell some more, but then his legs gave in and he began to fall. Hermione grabbed onto him and slowed his descent, but they still both ended up on the floor, their backs leaning against the bed.

"Draco, you *need* to get back to bed," she said.

"Just a minute," he said. "Let's get these fucking gits up to speed so we won't have to deal with this tomorrow."

Hermione nodded.

"So what happened?" asked Bronson.

Draco glanced sideways to see that Hermione was looking at him just as expectantly as the two sets of eyes in the mirror. It was then that he realized he had not told her yet.

"Flint's father found his wand. The Dark Lord used it to find out that I was the one that killed him," he explained. "I left as soon as he arrived with it to warn Granger, but Theo …" Draco gulped as he thought about his oldest friend, his heart feeling heavy as he imagined all of the horrible things they must be doing to him right now. "He stayed behind to create a diversion, to buy us more time to get out."

"Theo did *what*?" Bronson shouted while rising to his feet, pulling the mirror with him. "And *you* fucking let him?"

"It was his choice, Bronson. He was going to do it no matter what I said and you know it. Everyone in my bloody life seems to be stubborn as shit."

Hermione smirked and put her head on his shoulder.

"But … are they going to know to check for the Imperius Curse?" asked Bronson with tears in his eyes. He slowly began to sit back down.

"Yes," answered Draco. "It turns out another Death Eater is on our side. They helped us escape and they promised to make sure Theo was all right."

"Your father?" asked Bronson.

Draco pursed his eyebrows and said, "Fuck no. I can't give you a name for their safety, but it definitely wasn't fucking him. He followed me to my flat and tried to convince Granger to put the Imperius Curse on me."

A clock chimed on Bronson and Quigley's side of the mirror and they both looked towards it. "It's almost four," said Quigley.

"Then we should go," said Hermione.

Draco took a deep breath. "Listen, you two. Stay alert. I have no doubt that the Dark Lord is going to send someone to investigate you. Those shields on your minds should hold as long as you stay confident. But, if there is a turn for the worse, go to Andromeda. Understand?"

"Yes," they both said.

"But what about you two?" asked Bronson. "You're not going to just disappear on us, are you?"

Draco thought about this. While it would have been safer to just disappear, he wanted to stay informed on what was going on in the city just as much as they wanted to stay informed on his and Hermione's safety.

"No," he said. "Every third day, one a.m. Got it?"

"Yes," they both said again.

"Stay safe," said Bronson.

Draco nodded. "You too."

"Goodnight," said Hermione.

Draco touched the mirror and it went out. He leaned his head back against the bed and then began looking around the room for the first time, his face falling into a curious expression.

"Are we in fucking Weasley's room?"

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Pansy sat beside Theo's bed, holding his hand and struggling to keep her eyes open. His breathing had become steadier, but he still looked bloody awful.

Astoria was curled up in a chair nearby, fast asleep while Goyle lay sprawled on the floor at her feet. Pansy had to feel slight pity for the girl. She really did seem to have a crush on him but, from what Hermione and Draco had said, he was taken. By who, she could not imagine. Theo had always seemed to be even more afraid

of commitment than Draco. Probably because of his home life. It's hard to imagine understanding love when you have never experienced it yourself. At least she had her mum. But Theo … he had no one.

Just as her eyes began to flutter shut, Pansy heard a faint voice say her name. They shot back open and found Theo, who was now staring up at her.

"W-where … where am I?" he asked.

"In the Dark Lord's manor. In one of the guest rooms," she answered. She ran the back of her hand across his forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Bloody awful," he said, looking down at his bruised arms. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?"

Theo shook his head.

Pansy sighed. "The Dark Lord tortured you. To find out what you knew about Draco and Granger."

"Granger?" asked Theo, looking up at her. "What does *she* have to do with anything?"

Pansy pursed her eyebrows. "Don't you know?"

Theo shook his head again.

"She was living with you and Draco. For quite some time, I believe."

"I'm living with Draco?" he asked. "Why the fuck am I living with Draco?"

Pansy's breath hitched. Oh shit. "Theo … what is the last thing you remember?"

"I don't know, I …" Theo closed his eyes and thought hard. "Clearly?"

"Yes," she said.

"I remember the … the Dark Lord torturing me so he could use Legilimency."

All right. That was just a few hours ago -

"Because my father told him I might be a traitor."

Pansy closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Theo, that … that was

two months ago. It's January now."

Theo's eyes widened. "W-what? But I -"

"Please, just close your eyes and get some sleep," she said. "We'll figure this out in the morning, all right?"

Theo nodded slowly. He closed his eyes but Pansy could tell he was not resting. She continued to hold his hand, her eyes glazing over as she became deep in thought. She had been hoping that since she had to work with Lucius she might have another ally, but it did not look like that was going to happen. Because Theo … poor Theo truly did not have a clue.

"Shit," she whispered to herself. What the hell had she gotten herself into? And all for a boy who was never going to love her back.

# Chapter 27: I Feel Fine

**A/N: I'm back! Sorry for the delay. This chapter was almost finished before I left for vacation, but I went somewhere with a fourteen hour time difference and jet lag really hit me hard. :-P**

**Hope this was worth the wait!**

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"Are you sure?"

"Yesss."

"Positive?"

"Absolutely."

"Eighty-five percent?"

"I'm fucking fine, Granger! Eighty-seven percent even. Now, let's get a move on."

Draco began folding their clothes that had been thrown about over the last couple of days, only to have Hermione come stand next to him and refold each item. He grunted and just let her do it all. Why did he even bother?

"Draco, could you please make the bed?"

"What's the point? You're only going to redo it the moment I'm finished."

Hermione glanced sideways at him and smirked. "Not if you do it correctly."

Draco rolled his eyes, the new and horrid habit that he had finally accepted he was never going to break. He took out his unregistered wand, having already tucked his usual one away, and waved it halfheartedly at the bed, letting it make itself. He knew she hated this, swearing that wands never fluffed the pillows correctly or smoothed the wrinkles out properly, which was exactly why he had done it.

"Are you *trying* to pick a fight?" she asked, letting go of the last jumper she was folding and putting her hands on her hips.

Merlin, she looked cute when she was angry, brows all furrowed, nose crinkled and lips parted slightly. Draco could not help himself. He grabbed her by the waist and tossed her onto the improperly made bed, climbing on top of her and kissing her aggressively. They had not shagged once since escaping London three days

ago, the longest they had ever gone, and Draco was ready.

Unfortunately, Hermione was quick to shove him off of her and scurry away.

"*Not* until you're one-hundred percent, Draco!"

"But I *am* one-hundred percent," he insisted.

"I thought you said you were eighty-seven?" she said, cocking an eyebrow.

Draco fell spread-eagle onto the bed and sighed deeply. He closed his eyes. "Eighty-seven, one-hundred? Who gives a fuck? You *really* don't want to celebrate our freedom properly?"

Hermione said nothing. The room was silent until he heard the faint sound of her footsteps. He figured she was going back to packing, but then the bed shifted under her weight. When he opened his eyes again, her hands had just reached the hem of his trousers. She began undoing them.

"We're not shagging, Draco. You shouldn't be straining yourself like that. But … if you promise to hold very still, I will do something else for you."

Before Draco even had a chance to say, "Fuck yes," Hermione lowered her head and began sucking him off. Draco groaned immediately, his head falling back and his eyes closing once more. Three fucking days had been too long, and he could come right now if he wanted, but since she was being so difficult, he might as well make her work for it.

Draco grabbed her hair in his hands and started bucking his hips, but as soon as he did, Hermione pulled off of him and scowled. "I thought I said no movement. Now, hold still or I'll make you finish this yourself."

Draco bit his lip and grunted in compliance. Merlin, he loved that bossy tone of hers.

Hermione plunged back onto him and, this time, he could not hold back. It was only a matter of moments before he was coming down her throat. While he normally avoided this, knowing that she did not care for it much, today she did not seem to mind. She even licked her lips after, which practically made him hard again.

Draco grabbed her waist and pulled her on top of him, kissing her passionately as he rolled her onto her back. "Your turn," he said, raising his eyebrows suggestively before lowering his head.

Hermione grabbed his hair and aggressively pulled him back up. "Not now, Draco. We need to get moving." She kissed him chastely before climbing out from under him and going back to her small bag.

"But -"

"You can return the favor later," she said, turning back and winking at him.

Draco whined before climbing off the bed and redoing his trousers.

Hermione dug through her bag and came out with two bottles of Polyjuice Potion, followed by two plastic baggies with hairs in them. Draco had flat-out refused to use the hairs of a woman, so Hermione had put on her invisibility cloak and gone out to pluck some off of the head of a local man the day before - giving him quite a fright - while Wendy kept Draco distracted. He was bloody pissed when he found out she had gone into town alone but, after a little bit of snogging, he had gotten over it.

"Okay, we're only going to have an hour in these bodies once we take this, so I really think we should plan our course of action."

"What bloody course?" asked Draco, walking over to her and wrapping his arms around her waist. "We go to Hogsmeade, wander around town pretending to shop, listening for any fucking gossip on the resistance and then leave. We'll go into the forest and setup camp."

"You and I both know that any *real* gossip will be heard in the pub at nighttime," said Hermione, turning around in his arms to face him. She threw hers around his neck.

"So what are you suggesting?" he asked, pursing his eyebrows.

"Well … I think we should get a room at the inn."

Draco's eyes widened, his nostrils already flaring in anger. He opened his mouth to protest but, before he could, Hermione held a finger up to his lips.

"Now, Draco, please just hear me out. I have two hairs from one of your … your *slags*," she said scornfully, "and I grabbed several from that man in town for you. We could go now, check-in, wander around town until our potion starts to wear off and then hide out in our room until nightfall. Then we take our second round and go down to the pub to order drinks.

Draco licked her finger so she would remove it from his lips. Hermione made a

face and wiped it on her jumper.

"And when we need to leave?" he asked.

"We make basic alterations to our faces, eyes and hair to match our Polyjuice forms and hide under our cloaks. Simple."

Draco frowned. "You know, chances are we aren't going to hear anything," he said, wanting to be realistic.

"I know," she said. "But it's worth a shot, isn't it?"

He took a deep breath and nodded. "All right. Let's get this bloody over with."

Hermione smiled and pecked his lips before turning back around and taking the hairs out of their bags. She dropped just one into each potion and handed Draco his.

"Cheers," he said, clanking their glass bottles. They each brought theirs to their lips and swallowed them down.

It had been a long time since either of them had taken Polyjuice Potion, and both felt a little off as it altered their bodies, forming them into someone they were not. Hermione's hair became long and blonde, her eyes a bright-green and her skin golden while Draco's hair became dark, along with his eyes.

When they were finished with their transformations, Draco took a moment to look Hermione over, his face morphed into a curious expression while he cocked his head sideways.

"What?" she said in a foreign voice. "Don't remember shagging her?"

"Not at all," he said. Everyone before Hermione was really just a blur to him. Except Pansy. He just *wished* she was a blur.

Suddenly, the two of them could hear a haunting weeping sound coming from near the door. They both turned to see Wendy floating there, wiping at her eyes.

"I always knew we would have to say goodbye one day, but I was truly hoping we would have more time."

"Wendy …" Hermione walked towards her and held out her hand. "Thank you for all of your help."

Ignoring the hand, Wendy swooped forward and wrapped her arms so as they might actually be touching if she was solid. Hermione felt a chill but she fought hard against her urge to shiver.

"Good luck," said Wendy in her musical voice. "And promise that you will invite me to the wedding."

Hermione smiled. "Of course. After all, what would a wedding be without the provider of the ring?"

"And, maybe by then, I can call you by your real name, *Allie.*" Wendy winked at her before floating over to Draco. She attempted the same cold hug and they all said another round of quick goodbyes before Draco and Hermione took hands and Disapparated out of there.

The two of them arrived on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. They looked at each other nervously before walking towards the town neither had been to in years. At least, not for a leisurely visit. Draco had been involved in a few small battles against the resistance here over the years, but those hardly counted.

Hermione's hand tensed in his when she saw a lesser Death Eater, who was not important enough to be stationed in London, checking identification papers as people walked in and out of town.

Draco gave her hand a squeeze and confidently stepped forward.

"Papers," said the Death Eater, holding out his hand as soon as they walked up to him.

They both reached into the inside of their cloak pockets and pulled out their forged documents. Somehow, Hermione had found Draco's forger - probably because she went through his bloody stuff all of the time. She had sent Bronson there to get some for him, and he paid a pretty penny for them since he did not have the dirt on the man that Draco had. Of course, Hermione felt it was fine since they had used Draco's money for it. She and Bronson had become far too comfortable just taking it as they pleased. At one point, he would really have to draw the line between borrowing and stealing.

The man looked them over. Nicholas Cross and Allison Darby. Two unimpressive names, but Draco supposed that was the point. He glanced up at them, giving them each a onceover. Hermione especially. He seemed fond of Draco's former slag. Then he handed them their papers back and motioned for them to go on.

"Thank you," said Hermione, putting her papers away and grabbing back onto Draco's hand.

Draco took the lead, and guided them into the town, not stopping until they were at the Three Broomsticks. Some Snatcher had taken it over after Voldemort's victory, since Madam Rosmerta had disappeared with the resistance. It was much sleazier now, and lacked that homely feeling students at Hogwarts had always been so fond of.

"We'd like a room," Draco demanded upon locating the innkeeper. Manners were not appreciated in a place like this.

"Jus' the two o' yeh?" the man asked, looking down at his registry.

"Yes," said Draco. "One night."

The man scribbled something into his book. "Twenty Galleons. Yeh pay now."

"Bloody fucking rip-off," said Draco, reaching into his cloak and pulling out the said amount of money. No more, no less. He did not want anyone here knowing how much he was carrying on him. That could only end badly.

The man turned his book so Draco could sign while he turned and grabbed a key.

"Up the stairs, third door on yer left."

Draco took the key and nodded curtly before guiding Hermione up the stairs. They were only up there for a moment to keep up appearances before hurrying back downstairs. It was already a good twenty minutes into their hour, and they had to be sure to be in their bedroom before that happened.

As expected, no one around town said anything of interest so the two of them just ended up going to Honeydukes and buying some candy to munch on while stranded in their room for several hours. Though, none of it was as fun as it was in their youth, mainly because every Chocolate Frog card was now of Voldemort and whoever took over Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans thought it would be hilarious to make every flavor disgusting. There was not even a chance to get a good one anymore.

When back in their room, Draco took this time to return the favor from earlier. He could tell by how quickly Hermione came that he was not the only one this 'no shagging' was taking a toll on.

Having grown hard from the act, Draco decided it would be fun to try something

new - at least for them. He had, of course, done it all before.

Draco quickly pulled off his trousers and began to turn himself around so that they could both have some fun. But, before he could even get started, Hermione pulled out from under him and pushed him down so he was the one on his back. Then she positioned herself correctly and began sucking on his cock while he started pumping two fingers into her, all while happily feasting on her clit.

Merlin, he wanted to shag her so bad. While Draco had never enjoyed tasting and pleasuring a girl so much before, he also never enjoyed fucking them as much as he did her either. But, in hindsight, he knew she was right. His body was not fully healed yet and the two of them were not exactly known for being gentle. Even their more sensual lovemaking was still aggressive and passionate.

Hermione came pretty quickly with both his mouth and fingers working their magic, so Draco decided to go for a third while she finished him off. It was not hard. He knew her body well enough by now to get her off as quickly as he wanted. But, under normal circumstances, he enjoyed the tease of holding it off. He hardly felt guilty about it, considering she did the exact same thing to him.

When the two of them finished, Hermione turned herself around and collapsed by Draco's side. They both lay there, breathing heavily, neither completely satisfied as they craved something different. Something more.

"This is fucking ridiculous," said Draco, running his hand down her body and rubbing her clit again.

Hermione moaned in response. "I know but … but you *really* need to get better, Draco."

Draco grunted and pulled his hand away. "Then give me another bloody Healing Potion. If we're not shagging by tomorrow night then there's a chance I might lose my fucking mind."

Hermione giggled and gave him a kiss. She stood up and went over to her bag, shuffling through it until she found another basic Healing Potion.

"When we campout tomorrow night, I'll brew you something stronger," she said, handing him the bottle.

Draco grunted again and chugged it down. He supposed that meant they were not shagging *tomorrow* either.

The two of them decided to go down to the pub around ten o'clock. They sat at a table, ordered two mugs of butterbeer and firewhiskey, and silently cast charms on their ears that let them hone in on conversations. Draco first chose a table of dodgy looking fellows to their left while Hermione focused on a young, out of place couple - much like themselves - directly in front of her.

During their hour down there, Draco and Hermione did not hear any gossip on the resistance, but they did hear a lot about the supposed Death Eater who ran away with a Mudblood. The Dark Lord was furious, of course, and taking it out on the citizens of London. Security was heightened, no one could leave and Death Eaters were doing random raids on peoples' homes and businesses. Hearing this made Hermione nervous for Quigley and Bronson.

When their hour was just about up, Draco and Hermione paid their tab and went back upstairs. Hermione made him go to bed immediately, but she stayed up, sitting on the windowsill and reading one of her books, learning the ingredients for a stronger potion for Draco. She read until one a.m., when an alarm she had set went off. She reached for her bag and took out her two-way mirror, saying Bronson's name into it. His face appeared instantly.

"You moved," was the first thing he said, noticing the window.

"Yes," said Hermione, sitting down against the wall so that he could not see anything else from the room. It was safest if he had absolutely no clue where they were. "We are following a rumor on the resistance."

"No luck yet?"

Hermione sighed. "No."

She glanced up at Draco's sleeping figure. She was really worried about him. He was not as healed as he should have been at this point. She suspected internal injuries, but did not have the means to heal him properly. She needed more items, more herbs, more everything, and all were next to impossible to obtain. Phoenix tears, unicorn horn shavings, fairy dust. After everything they had been through, she could not lose him to something so trivial as packing the wrong sort of Healing Potions. If only she had been more prepared …

"Have you seen Theo?" she asked, looking back into the mirror.

Now it was Bronson's turn to sigh. "No," he answered.

"Bronson, we … we heard rumors about Death Eaters in London raiding peoples'

homes. Have … have they -?"

"No," he said before she could finish. "They haven't come to our flat and I'm sort of worried about it. I know they suspect us of something. They did stop by our restaurant but I wasn't there. Quigley was. They did Legilimency on him and all of the other employees. Malfoy's shields held."

"That's good," she said. Draco began to stir in the bed and Hermione looked up at him. He was awake. She knew he was. "I should go." Hermione looked back at the mirror and sighed deeper this time. "I miss you, Bronson."

He smiled weakly. "I miss you too. Both of you, if you can imagine."

Hermione chuckled. "Hopefully, we can all be together soon. You, me, Draco, Quigley … Theo."

Bronson nodded. "Goodnight, Cupcake." He winked. "I'll see you in three days."

Hermione nodded back. "Goodnight."

She touched the mirror and his image disappeared. She put it down on the dresser and went over to the bed, climbing in next to Draco. His arms were already ready for her.

"Are they all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered. "I think he's just worried. About us. About Theo."

Draco gulped. "No news on him?"

"No," she said, sighing into his chest. A pause. "We should sleep."

Draco nodded and kissed the top of her head. He closed his eyes again and faked sleep for the rest of the night. It was impossible for him to get to that state when the guilt of leaving Theo behind was eating away inside of him.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

The following night, Draco woke up in their tent feeling sick. He hurried to their small washroom and instantly began vomiting into the toilet. When it passed, he pulled away and looked down. Blood. There was always fucking blood!

All day he had been vomiting like this, trying to hide it from Hermione while they walked through the forest just outside of Hogsmeade, searching for any sign that

people had either resided or come through there. There was none. If the resistance was hiding out in that forest, they had covered their tracks well.

The two of them had decided against staying in the forest. It just seemed too obvious, so they opted to setup camp high in the mountains instead. Hermione's idea.

After the two had setup their tent, Hermione made dinner, which had tasted a little off to him. Right after, he had become incredibly drowsy and went straight to bed. He supposed his body was trying to tell him something.

"Shit," he said quietly to himself before pressing his forehead against the white porcelain. It was a moment before he realized that when he jumped out of bed, Hermione had not been in it. His head immediately shot back up.

"Granger?" he called.

No answer.

Draco stood up, his head still spinning, and wobbled into the main room. "Granger?"

Nothing.

Draco groaned. "Fucking shit!" he shouted with a stamp of his foot.

He hurried over and grabbed his cloak from where he had thrown it, not even bothering with his jumper. He slipped on his shoes and ran outside.

Draco stepped out into the snow, small flakes falling into his hair. He pulled on his hood, only then realizing how cold it was.

"Granger!" he called, knowing that no one could hear him in the confines of their shields. "Granger, where the fuck are you?"

His cries for her were almost desperate. He assumed she had just come out for air, but she truly was not here.

"FUCK!"

Without thinking, without coming up with any sort of plan, Draco started running for the boundaries of their shields. He slipped right out of them, noticing that a scarf had been tied to a nearby tree, obviously to alert Hermione of their tent's location.

Draco could not, for the life of him, figure out where the fuck she could have gone. He was just about to run around mindlessly when he saw a faint figure in the dark walking towards him. Knowing that silhouette anywhere, Draco sighed in relief.

He ran up to her, meeting her halfway and shouting, "Where the fuck have you been?"

"Draco, w-what are you doing awake?" she asked, her lips blue and her body shaking.

Draco pulled her close and held her coldness against his warmth. She wrapped her frozen arms around him.

"Why aren't you wearing a jumper?" she asked. "You'll freeze!"

"I'll freeze?" he shouted, holding out his hand to call the scarf into it and guiding her back into the safety of their shields. "What about you? You're already fucking frozen!"

Once they got inside, Draco stripped Hermione of her cloak and clothes and helped her into a pair of flannel pajamas. He waved his wand at the kitchen and tea started making itself for them.

"Where were you?" he demanded, guiding her over to the small sofa in their tent and wrapping her favorite blanket around her. She had stuffed it into her bag at the very last minute before they left London.

Hermione looked up into his gray eyes, gleaming silver with the glossiness of tears, and sighed. She held out her hand and said, "*Accio Cloak*." It came instantly. She was getting much better at wandless magic.

Once Hermione had her cloak in hand, she dug through the pockets and came out with a small, glass phial that had some sort of clear liquid in it.

"After Professor Dumbledore died, his Phoenix, Fawkes, flew into these mountains. I went looking for him."

"Why?" asked Draco, sitting on the coffee table in front of her and using his wand to summon the cups of finished tea. He handed her one and she took a small sip, taking a moment to close her eyes and let the warmth consume her. It felt good. She had not been prepared for a cold like this.

"I needed these," she said, holding up the phial again. She gulped. "Phoenix tears."

Hermione quickly cast her eyes to her tea, not wanting to watch as Draco filled with rage.

"And why *the fuck* was it so important you got these now? At fucking night. When we're *fucking fugitives*!"

Hermione sighed again. She said nothing.

"Are you not going to *fucking* answer me?"

"Not until you calm down," she said, glancing up at him.

"No, I won't! I won't fucking calm down, Granger!" shouted Draco while rising to his feet. "I didn't come all of this fucking way to lose you now!"

"Then you know how I feel," she said, her gaze following him up.

"What?" he asked, looking down into her amber eyes.

Sighing yet again, Hermione put down her tea and stood up. "Do you really think I'm that stupid, Draco? That I didn't see you sneaking off to vomit blood all afternoon?"

"I -"

"Draco, you're sick! You're fucking sick from all of that damn torturing and you know it!" she shouted, her eyes now flaring. "That's why I drugged your dinner with a Sleeping Draught, climbed a bloody mountain in the middle of the night so you wouldn't *insist* on coming with me, and located a lost Phoenix so that I could use his tears to brew a powerful potion that will give you the help you need!"

Draco stared at her, eyes unblinking and mouth agape. "You … you drugged me?"

"Yes," she hissed. "Because I love you and I don't want to lose you to something as stupid as not taking care of yourself!"

Hermione was breathing heavily now. She continued to gaze at him with narrowed eyes. Draco finally blinked, then he slowly began to lower himself back to the coffee table. Once down, he reached out and grabbed Hermione by the waist, pulling her onto his lap.

"I didn't want to worry you," he said, nuzzling his head into her neck.

"I know," she said, tears now in her eyes as she hugged him tight. "But you can't

… you can't do that, Draco. You need help. Please … please, just let me help you."

Draco sighed and nodded against her. "What else do you need?"

"A lot of things," she said. "I … I wanted to sneak into Hogwarts tomorrow and take the items from the Potions classroom."

Draco pulled back a little so he could see her face and cocked an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but the Apothecary Shop in Hogsmeade is too small to go in unnoticed, and these aren't exactly items you can just purchase without raising suspicion."

"But … neither of us has been back there since …" Draco gulped. "… since …"

"Draco, I know," said Hermione, plopping her forehead against his. She did not need a reminder. She knew what he was referring to. "But my feelings for you are far greater than any fear I might have of that place. I love you and I'm going."

"Then I'm coming too," said Draco in a dry voice.

"Draco, no," she said, pulling her head away from his. "You *need* to rest."

"I won't rest at all if I know you're fucking there."

"But you can take a Sleeping Draught and -"

Draco put a finger to her lips. "I think we proved tonight that the Sleeping Draught won't work as long as it's supposed to. I'm *going* with you, Granger. And then we'll come back here, you'll make the potion and I will lie in my bed for however fucking long you want. All right?"

Hermione smiled and kissed his finger. "All right," she said back. "But we only have one invisibility cloak."

"A miniscule problem. I'll take care of that in the morning," said Draco, picking her up and moving them both over to the sofa. Even this small action hurt him. He tried to hide it but Hermione was not fooled. She looked sadly at him with her big, brown eyes and stroked his face, giving his cheek a kiss before grabbing both of their teacups so that they could enjoy it quickly before bed. Tomorrow could not come soon enough.

XXX

The next afternoon, Draco and Hermione got ready to leave, Hermione tying her small bag to her waist and Draco casting a spell to expand the size of their invisibility cloak so that it could cover both of them like a blanket.

After a small meal, since both of their stomachs could not take much, Draco and Hermione altered their appearances and left the tent. Wanting a less obvious way to find their way back than the scarf, Hermione marked the tree with their initials, putting a cheesy heart around them. Even though Draco openly mocked the gesture, he secretly loved it.

As soon as that was done, the two of them grabbed hands and Draco was just about to Apparate them when Hermione stopped him.

"Draco, look," she said, pointing to the distance.

Draco lifted his head to see a majestic, red and gold bird flying near the highest peak of the mountains.

"Did you go all the way up there?" he asked, his eyebrows raising.

"No," answered Hermione. "Fawkes found me before I had to. I'm pretty sure he knew I was looking for him."

"He remembers you?"

"Of course," she said with a bright smile. "Phoenixes are very intelligent creatures."

Draco nodded. "Shall we?" he said.

Hermione said, "Yes, let's go," but her eyes never left the bird.

Draco held her close and Apparated the two of them to Hogsmeade. Unfortunately, it was impossible to Apparate inside the town walls or use any objects with the Disillusionment Charm placed on them, so they were forced to get inside with their fake papers again. Luckily, there was a different Death Eater checking them today, so they did not have to worry about him recognizing their names.

Once Draco and Hermione were inside, they headed towards Honeydukes, having decided that this was the secret passage they were going to take.

The shop was busy this time of day, and so the two of them were able to wander

inside just behind a group of young, giggling girls. Hermione had a feeling they were ditching class, and had to fight the urge to scold them for taking their studies so lightly.

Draco and Hermione maneuvered their way through the shop and waited for the shopkeeper to turn his back, becoming distracted by the young girls who wanted every candy imaginable. They took this time to sneak into the back, where they quickly went through the trapdoor.

The two of them walked down a set of stone steps for a good ten minutes before they reached steady ground. Hermione wanted to levitate Draco but, as always, he refused,

They walked with the invisibility cloak over them now, even though it probably was not necessary considering it was highly unlikely that anyone wanted to sneak into Hogwarts anymore. Only out. Still, they did not want to take any chances. The corridor down here was long. Hermione remembered Harry saying as much, but she was still not quite prepared for it.

She leant Draco her shoulder as they walked. Even in the dark, she could still see how ill he looked. His already pale skin had become ashen, and the brightness of his eyes had dimmed to the color of storm clouds.

"Draco, maybe you should wait here. I'll be fine -"

"No!" he shouted, removing his arm from around her shoulders and doing his usual strut out of the invisibility cloak and down the corridor. "I'm not quite as weak as you believe. It's just the bloody stairs that got me."

Hermione frowned and hurried to follow, throwing the cloak back over him. She took his hand and held on tight. Sometimes, she wished he could stop putting on this brave face for just one second and admit that he was not all right. But, she supposed, he felt he had a lot to make up for, considering he was such a coward in their youth.

It was a good hour before they got to the end. Draco seemed fine. He had not vomited today, at least.

There was a slide at the end of the corridor that they would need to climb somehow to reach the castle. Hermione waved her wand and transfigured it into stairs, making sure to add a railing for Draco to hold onto.

They ascended the stairs and, when they got to the top, Draco pushed the portrait

blocking them open, just a smidgeon, and peeked out. The coast was clear.

The reason Draco and Hermione had chosen to come at this hour was because they knew all of the students and professors would be having dinner in the Great Hall. Only the Dementors who now roamed the corridors would be around, and, with Pansy's trick, they would be easy to avoid.

"I never asked," Hermione whispered as they moved through the halls, heading for the stairs that would lead them into the dungeons. "Who is the Headmaster now?"

Draco smirked. "Headmistress," he corrected, glancing sideways at her. "You're not going to like it."

"Well, *obviously*," she said with a roll of her eyes.

His smirk widened. He put an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. "It's Bellatrix."

"*Really*?" said Hermione, raising her eyebrows. "But she's never even here. She's always in London. How could she possibly be teaching the students properly?"

"Granger … think about what you just said." Draco chuckled and kissed her blushing cheek again. "She comes here twice a week to check on things. The Dark Lord's orders."

"Oh." Hermione paused. "Is she here now?" she asked, slight worry in her tone.

"Probably not," he answered. "She's most likely out looking for me." Now he paused. "Want to check?"

"No!" she whispered sharply.

"Why not? It's not like she'll know we're here. In fact, this is probably one of the last places they will check for me."

"Because only idiots would walk into a school run by people who want to capture, torture and kill them?"

Draco smirked. "Exactly."

Hermione rolled her eyes again. "Well, maybe you like to live dangerously, but I really just want to get in and out."

"Yes, I know," he said. "I do too. But …"

"But *what*?"

Draco glanced sideways at her. "I want to see."

"See what?"

"What the Great Hall looks like now. After everything." His voice became raw and strained as he spoke.

Hermione sighed deeply. She stopped walking and turned to face him, the cloak still hanging over their heads. "Is it really important to you that we see?"

Draco put his hands on her hips. He pressed his forehead against hers, looked into her eyes and quietly said, "Yes."

Hermione nodded. "All right then." She kissed him before taking his hand and rerouting them towards the Great Hall.

When they were just about there, Draco pulled Hermione towards the left, where a tapestry hung. He lifted it and pressed a brick with a snake on it, revealing a hidden door.

"This was the Slytherins' secret entrance whenever any of us were late for dinner."

"Oh, what a cunning little snake you were," Hermione jested as he pulled her through the doorway.

The two of them walked through the short passageway. There was no door on the other end, just a thin, magical tapestry that Draco and Hermione were able to look right through to the other side.

"It is charmed so that we could see when the professors were not watching and make our move," whispered Draco.

Hermione stared into the hall, which was formerly known as great. Now, it was a sad sight, with just one table in its center full of overworked, exhausted-looking students in black robes that resembled those of Death Eaters. They all ate in silence while a handful of wicked-looking professors watched on - one of them being Professor Slughorn, who had been captured and Imperiused shortly after the Battle of Hogwarts. The professors engorged themselves in a feast served by chained house-elves and Muggles. The students were given barely anything. There were a few with cold eyes and sneers that seemed to have more food than the others, probably a reward for doing cruel deeds to their peers during lessons.

At the center of the professors' table, in Dumbledore's throne-like chair that had been changed to black and silver, sat Bellatrix, as twisted and wicked-looking as ever. She did not look pleased to be here in the least, constantly staring up at a giant clock that now encased the bewitched ceiling. Not one enchanted candle lit the room. It was all very dark and very dreary.

"Everyone finish your meals quickly. The Dark Lord wishes you all to practice the Cruciatus Curse among yourselves every night from now on before bed," she announced. "In five minutes I will be removing the tables and chairs and you will be assigned partners. I suggest you all work hard to be victorious tonight, because when your schooling is over, the Dark Lord will have no use for mediocre Death Eaters."

Several of the students' eyes widened with fright, but many of them, the bulk of them, seemed excited that they would be torturing each other in a few short minutes.

Hermione gulped beside Draco and quickly ran in the opposite direction, not caring that she was no longer covered by the safety of the invisibility cloak. Draco ran after her and grabbed her arm, holding her still while he tossed it back over her head.

"You were right," he said, using his thumb to wipe tears from her eyes. "We should not have looked."

"They're … they're training them all, THEM ALL to become … to become Death Eaters," choked Hermione.

"I know," said Draco, pulling her close and hugging her to him. "The Dark Lord wants to start training all wizards and witches from a young age. Next year, he plans to start admitting students as young as seven."

"And he wants to train seven years olds to *torture* each other?" she spat, closing her eyes and letting her tears fall against his chest. "He's sick. *Sick*!"

"Yes, he is," said Draco, kissing the top of her head. He then released her and took her hand. "Come on. Let's get what we came for and then get the hell out of here."

Hermione nodded, letting Draco guide her out of their narrow, hidden corridor and back into the main part of the castle. They continued towards the basement.

As they descended the stairs, the little bit of light emitting in the halls began to

suck away. Draco quickly cast '*Lumos*' and touched it to his Dark Mark. A whistling sound started and then began fading into the opposite direction.

It was not long before they were in their old Potions classroom, Hermione fumbling in her pocket for the list of ingredients she needed. She and Draco took off their invisibility cloak, went into the cupboard, grabbed all that they needed and put it into her bag.

"I believe that's everything," said Hermione, crossing unicorn horn shavings off of her list as Draco slipped a phial of them into her bag.

"Good," he said. "Then let's get the fuck out of here."

Hermione put her list back into her pocket and placed the quill back where she had found it. Draco attached her bag to his hip and the two of them slipped the invisibility cloak back over their heads.

Draco opened the door to the hallway a crack and peeked out. A Dementor was slowly drifting down the corridor, so he cast '*Lumos*' again and touched it to his mark. The Dementor swiftly turned in the opposite direction.

Taking hold of Hermione's hand, Draco guided them out of the Potions classroom and began heading back towards their exit.

On their way out, Draco and Hermione suddenly heard the sound of many footsteps coming towards them. They ducked into one of the narrower corridors and waited for them to pass.

Draco poked his head around the corner, watching curiously as an Imperiused Slughorn walked like a zombie, guiding the few students left at Hogwarts in two perfectly straight lines - most covered in cuts and bruises from their lesson on the Cruciatus Curse. They were all silent as they walked, making Draco long for the loud chatter that echoed through these halls only a few years ago.

Draco was so enthralled with the scene that he did not notice as Hermione turned to face the opposite direction, going into a trance as it suddenly dawned on her where they were. She walked straight ahead, leaving the safety of the invisibility cloak without even realizing it.

When the students had all passed, Draco turned around just in time to see Hermione's foot turn the corner. He hurried after her.

"Granger!" he called in a harsh but quiet voice. She did not answer. "Granger,

what are you doing?"

Hermione continued to walk in a trance, turning another corner before Draco finally took in their surroundings. "Oh shit," he whispered to himself.

Hermione did not stop until she was at the spot where two corridors met. The same spot where she and Draco had once collided, changing her life forever.

"Granger …" Draco's voice came out strained as he watched her standing there, her eyes mesmerized as she stared down at the ground.

After a moment, her shoulders began to bob. Tears pooled down her cheeks and, before long, her legs were giving in and she was collapsing towards the floor.

Draco hurried forward and caught her, slowing her decent before throwing the invisibility cloak back over her head. He held her there, stroking her hair while Hermione sobbed into his chest. He knew coming here was a mistake. There was nothing worse than seeing her hurting like this.

Draco and Hermione stayed there, sitting in that corridor for a long time, until they finally decided it was time to leave. They had already tempted fate by coming here, and the longer they stayed, the more likely it was that it would stop working in their favor.

They walked back through the halls and up the stairs, finding their portrait and taking the slide back down to their hidden passage. At the end of the corridor, they took off their invisibility cloak and put it away since it would do them no good in town.

Draco went first and lifted the trapdoor, making sure the coast was clear. It was already late, so the shop was dark and abandoned. They headed up the stairs and went out the back door as quietly as possible. Snatchers were roaming the town, working as guards of sorts, so Draco made sure none were around before turning the corner, dragging Hermione with him.

They hurried towards the forest, a spell cast on their feet to hide their footprints.

Neither knew, though, that they were not alone on those cold, isolated streets. A pair of chocolate-brown eyes watched them closely from underneath a special invisibility cloak that was not charmed with the Disillusionment Spell, so it worked in Hogsmeade despite the wards. When Hermione turned her head at the sound of a rustling, a gentle breeze pushed her hood back, revealing her face to their onlooker.

Their heart stopped. They began to move forward, but then their eyes drifted to the person whose hand Hermione was holding. The sleeve on their cloak was slightly lifted, revealing the bottom of a black tattoo. The Dark Mark. They gasped.

Draco and Hermione reached the forest, Hermione using her wand to toss a rock deep into it far from where they stood. An alarm went off and Snatchers ran off in that direction. While they were distracted, the two of them hurried away, both blindly unaware of the presence now following closely behind them.

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Hermione stood over the cauldron, stirring it mindlessly while Draco watched from a nearby chair. She had not spoken a word since they returned.

"Are you all right, love?" he finally asked, unable to take the silence any longer.

Hermione nodded and tossed some sprigs of lavender into the cauldron.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded again.

Draco sighed and put his elbows on the table in front of him, rubbing at his eyes with his hands.

"It's funny, isn't it?"

Draco put his hands down and looked at her once more. "What is?" he asked.

"I keep trying to tell myself otherwise, but I really can't think of one possible scenario, besides us colliding, that would have ever led to me and you being together."

Draco looked away from her again. He had often wondered the same thing.

"Would you still change things?" she asked, staring intently into the cauldron. "If … if given the chance?"

"Yes," he said in a quiet, strained voice.

A tear dripped down Hermione's cheek.

Draco hurried to his feet and went behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "That doesn't mean that I'm not happy being with you, Granger," he said,

nuzzling his head against her neck. "It just means that, if given the opportunity, I would not want you to go through all of that pain. You could have been happy without me. Actually, I'm pretty certain you would have been."

"Only because I wouldn't have known," she said, leaning into his touch.

"You can't honestly say that all of this is worth it. What the world has become, everything you've been through … You deserve better."

"I know, it's just …" Hermione sighed and put down her ladle. "Never mind." She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. "What about you? You hadn't been back to that spot since your mother was murdered there. Were you … were you all right?"

Draco cast his eyes downward and nodded his head. He was silent for a long moment before saying, "Can I tell you something? And … and you won't laugh?"

Hermione smiled and kissed his cheek. "Obviously, Draco."

He sighed and pressed his forehead against hers. "Part of me has wondered that when I finally went back there, to Hogwarts, that I might …" He gulped. "That I might see her again. As a ghost. I don't know if I'm disappointed or relieved that she wasn't there."

"Relieved," Hermione answered for him. "Your mother never would have become a ghost, Draco, because she did not fear death. If she did then she never would have defied You-Know-Who the way she did. Her only concern was you."

Draco nodded and sighed deeper. "Still … It would have been nice to see her."

"I know," said Hermione with a frown. She kissed his lips, lingering there for a moment while his grip tightened around her waist. When she finally pulled away, she smiled. "You know, this potion won't be ready for another few hours."

Draco groaned.

Hermione's smile grew. "But it will still work mildly if you take some now. Perhaps enough to …" She trailed off and winked suggestively.

She did not have to tell him twice. Draco quickly pushed past her and filled the ladle with some potion, drinking it down quickly. "Well, would you look at that?" he said, rubbing his lips along her neck and carrying her towards the bed. "Instantaneous."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It takes about five minutes, Draco." She pulled away from him and smiled seductively, putting one hand on his chest and pushing him down onto the bed. "But, I suppose while it kicks in, I can get things started." She pulled off her jumper and tossed it to the side, slowly climbing on top of him and straddling his lap. She lingered her lips above his, barely touching as his breathing became heavy. She smirked before finally meeting his lips with hers, kissing him hard as he slowly began to fall back on the bed.

Just when her hands reached his trousers, the alarm went off, signaling that someone had entered their tent. Draco and Hermione turned quickly, jumping to their feet just as four people in masks hurried towards them.

"Shit," said Draco, holding out his hand and calling both of their wands to him. He handed Hermione hers and the two of them began shooting hexes at the strangers heading towards them.

Hermione tried to grab her jumper as Draco stunned one of their pursuers, but someone shot a hex at her and she was forced to dodge it. She landed on the floor, crawling on her hands and knees to reach her piece of clothing, but spells kept flying at her. Draco tried to help, but he was a bit busy blocking his own spells.

One of the mask-wearers removed the Stunning Spell from their comrade and, once again, it was two against one. Hermione stretched her arm out for her jumper but quickly had to dodge behind a table. "Dammit!" she shouted.

Draco used his wand to try to send it flying towards her but she had to move again before it got there. Draco rolled his eyes. This was getting bloody ridiculous.

"Stop!" he shouted. Everyone kept shooting spells at each other. "Stop!" No one stopped. "STOP!" There was a mild pause from the other party. "Just let her put her fucking jumper on, will you?"

Three of the mask-wearers looked to their shortest member. The obvious leader. They nodded and Hermione was able to summon her jumper and slip it on.

Draco looked at her and smirked. "Don't worry, love. They're your friends. We both know mine would never let you redress yourself."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"*What*? What did you call her?"

Draco and Hermione's heads snapped in the leader's direction. They knew that

voice.

Draco waved his wand and the person's mask went flying off, letting them stare into the flushed and freckly face of Ginny Weasley.

"Aw, Weaslette. I thought that was you. She always makes me listen to you on the bloody radio."

"G-Ginny?" stuttered Hermione, too stunned to move. "Is it really you?"

"Whether it's really me is hardly the question," said Ginny, keeping her wand pointed adamantly at Draco while her eyes drifted over to Hermione. "What I would like to know is if it's really *you*? The Her -" She paused and gulped. "The girl I knew would *never* be here with the likes of *him*."

"Well, ouch," said Draco, mock-pouting. Hermione looked at him and rolled her eyes.

"Ginny, we need to move this along," said one of the mask-wearers, a male voice Hermione was sure she recognized. "We only have a good twenty minutes before the Snatchers head this way for patrol and we need to be long gone before then."

Ginny nodded. Her eyes narrowed as she moved them back to Draco. He just smiled, irking her in a way she had never been irked before. "*Stupefy*!"

Draco fell back unconscious, the last thing he heard was Hermione's screams as she, undoubtedly, ran to his side.

Well, this was it. The moment they had been waiting for. While he may not have been killed on the spot, he still doubted he was going to get out of this unscathed. Still, he had to do this. For her. Because this was what she wanted. To return to her friends with him at her side, and all *he* wanted was for her to be happy.

# Chapter 28: Strawberry Fields Forever

**A/N: I wasn't planning on updating so quickly, but I was really inspired for this chapter since I have been waiting for this moment since I started writing this story! Yay for reunions!**

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When Hermione woke up, she was on a lone mattress in the center of a cell-like room. Her head had been carefully placed on a pillow but, aside from that, the room was bare.

"Draco?" she called.

No one answered.

"Draco?" she repeated louder this time.

"Next door, love."

Hermione scrambled to her hands and knees and crawled towards the sound of the voice. "Draco, are you all right?"

"As good as to be expected, I suppose. All things considered."

"They … they haven't hurt you." She gulped. "Have they?"

"Not yet."

Hermione sighed in relief and sank her back against the wall. "Good." She began looking around the room, her eyes narrowing as she realized how filthy of a place they had thrown her in. "How's *your* room?" she asked.

"Oh, I wouldn't go as far as calling it a room. Just a dirty, cement box, really."

"No mattress?"

A pause. "*You* got a mattress? Well, if this isn't bloody favoritism then I don't know what is!"

Hermione chuckled. "While this may come as a shock to your ego, Draco, I do believe they like me a tidbit better than you."

Another pause. "Bloody fucking nepotism …"

Hermione chuckled again before sighing. "How long do you think we've been in

here?"

"Stunning Spells of that caliber tend to work on me for just under an hour, and I woke up about ten minutes before you did," said Draco. "I've never run into Weaselette on the battlefield before. I had no idea she was that strong or else I might have at least attempted to block it a little."

"She's obviously been practicing," said Hermione, pursing her lips as her eyes continued to wander around the room. "What do you think they're waiting for?"

"Probably for some Polyjuice Potion to wear off."

"Of who?" she asked, crinkling her forehead.

"You, *obviously*," he answered. "I doubt they expected to find their Gryffindor princess in such a compromising position with a Death Eater, four years of slavery or not."

Hermione blushed. Merlin, she had almost forgotten about that. Her blush only brightened when she realized Draco was laughing. "It's not funny!" she snapped.

Draco laughed louder. "So who do you think is guarding us out there? Do you think it's someone we know? Are we making them uncomfortable?"

Crap! Hermione had forgotten about that too. She was really rusty at this whole being captured thing.

"Should I go into more detail about what it was we were doing?"

"No!" shouted Hermione, along with a male voice coming from outside of her door. It was the same man who had spoken to Ginny before. It took a moment, but she was sure she recognized it. "Dean? Dean, is that you?"

No answer, but she could have sworn she heard a gulp.

"Fine, you don't have to say anything. I already know I'm right," she said. "You can tell Ginny and whoever else is in charge that it's been an hour and my form hasn't changed. I haven't used any Polyjuice Potion. It's just me."

There was a small pause before Dean finally said, "They've already been informed."

Hermione pursed her eyebrows and began looking around the room again. "Is there a camera in here or something?"

"Or something," he answered.

"So, Dean," said Draco's voice, "firstly, is there a surname or something I can call you by? 'Dean' just seems so informal and, while I am sure we went to school together, I simply cannot put a face to a first name right now."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "He was in our class, Draco."

"So … a Gryffindor perhaps?"

"Yes!" she snapped.

"Well, there's the problem! I never bothered to learn any of the bloody Gryffindor's names but your annoying trio, since you all just loved to make your presences known in my life."

Hermione chuckled. "You're insufferable."

"Nothing you didn't already know." She could even hear the smirk in his voice. "So, Dean, an answer?"

"I'm not telling you my name, you fucking Death Eater!"

"Hmm … yes. Definitely a Gryffindor. Well, I suppose I will go onto my secondly then." Draco cleared his throat. "*Secondly*, I can tell you all right now that you are wasting your time brewing that antidote. I have not given Granger any bloody Love Potion."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Is *that* what they're doing? Seriously?"

A slight pause. "How did you …?"

"I can't tell you how many times I've been on the other side of the door, Dean. I know how the captor thinks," said Draco, obviously still smirking.

"Did he just say your name?" asked the accusing voice of Ginny, which had suddenly appeared.

"Uh … N-no … I -"

"It was my fault, Ginny," said Hermione. "I recognized Dean's voice and Draco has apparently taken a liking to saying it."

"If he would just give me a surname …"

"Learn the name of your schoolmates, Draco!"

"Move him into a further room," ordered Ginny. "We don't want him chiming in during questioning."

"Might I request one with a mattress this time? It seems you forgot mine when you were handing out rooms before."

Hermione heard the door to Draco's room open.

"Who unbound him?" Ginny demanded. "Dean?"

"It wasn't me!" Dean said defensively.

"Don't play the blame game, Weaselette. I unbound myself. Those ropes you used were chafing horribly."

"They bound you, Draco?" Hermione asked through the wall.

A pause. "*You're* not bound?"

"No."

"More bloody fucking favoritism! It's a conspiracy, I tell you!"

"How did you unbind yourself?" Ginny demanded.

"Uhh, a spell. Obviously."

"You know wandless magic?"

"I repeat. *Obviously.*" Hermione could hear the growing irritation in Draco's voice.

"Then why are you still here? Why haven't you used your magic to escape?" asked Ginny.

"Well, there is the small matter of my girlfriend that you have locked up next door. You see, she *wants* to be here."

"Ugh … don't call her *that*!"

"And just what would you like me to call her? 'Love' is out. 'My girlfriend' is out. Her real name is out, for obvious reasons."

"*Silencio*!"

Hermione chuckled. "He can remove that too, Ginny."

"Move him and move him quickly!" she ordered.

"I'm beginning to think you don't like me very much, Weaselette."

"One more bloody word and I swear I'll use the Cruciatus Curse on you, Malfoy!"

"No!" Hermione screamed from her side of the wall. "Draco, please just cooperate! You can't be cursed again! Not before you've taken the potion!"

She could hear Draco sigh on the other side of the wall. "Fine. Bind me if you must and move me to another mattress-less room. I will silently suffer the hardships of most-hated prisoner from here on out."

There was some shuffling as Hermione assumed Draco stood up and walked towards the door.

"Dean, move him. And keep your guard up. We really have no idea what he's capable of."

"He's not going to do anything, Ginny," Hermione said through the wall. "He has no hidden agenda. You can give me whatever potions you've brought now and I'll prove it to you."

The door to Hermione's room clicked and then opened. Ginny stepped through and stood in the doorway. Two people in masks were standing behind her. They moved to follow but she held her hand out and stopped them.

"Give me a few minutes alone," she said.

They nodded and she shut the door behind her.

Ginny slowly walked towards Hermione, who was still sitting against the wall. She stopped in front of her and asked, "Do you know wandless magic too?"

"Some," Hermione answered honestly. "But I've only been practicing it for a couple of months. He's been perfecting it for years."

Ginny sighed before handing her a small, pink bottle. "Drink that one first."

"Love Potion Antidote?" asked Hermione, cocking an eyebrow before drinking it down. "Don't you think the Draco Malfoy we knew in school has better things to do than give Amortentia to a Mudblood?" She tossed the bottle aside. "How long do

we have to wait?"

"Not long," said Ginny, who kept trying to analyze Hermione's face, then turning away quickly out of some sort of fear of looking at her.

"I see you've noticed my scars," said Hermione, reaching up and touching one of the larger ones on her right cheek. "They were much worse, but Draco helped me heal them as best he could."

Ginny's eyes began to tear as she looked towards the door.

Hermione sighed. "Please, don't cry, Ginny. They're just scars."

Ginny closed her eyes and quickly sucked back her tears. When she opened them again she glanced at the watch she wore on her wrist. "How do you feel? Still …" She gulped. "Still romantically towards … towards Malfoy?"

Hermione sighed again. "Yes. I'm sorry you had to find us like … like *that*. I know it's probably hard to understand but -"

"Drink this," interrupted Ginny, holding out another small bottle, this one blue.

"Is it Veritaserum?" asked Hermione, taking it from her hand.

"Yes."

Hermione frowned. "I feel the need to tell you that I have been practicing Occlumency, as well, and I know it can be used to counter the effects of -"

"Don't bloody tell her that!" Draco's voice shouted from his room down the hall. "You're not going to use fucking Occlumency so why would you tell her -?"

"I was just being honest, Draco! I didn't want them to find out later and think I was deceiving them or something!"

"Seriously, how thin are these *fucking* walls?" Ginny shouted towards the door.

"Not *that* thin!" called another male voice Hermione swore sounded familiar.

"Don't blame the walls, Ginny. Draco and I know a spell that helps us hone in on distant conversations," explained Hermione. "I'm positive that that's what he's using now."

"Just forget it." Ginny huffed and tore the potion out of Hermione's hand. She

kneeled down and looked her straight in the eye. "When did you escape?"

"September," answered Hermione. "About four days before the curfew went into effect."

"And where have you been all this time?"

"For the first three days I was just wandering around London, trying to evade recapture. Then Draco found me and kept me hidden in his flat. That is, until about five days ago when You-Know-Who discovered that he was harboring me. We barely escaped the city and have been wandering around searching for you … the resistance, ever since."

"So … you're seriously telling me that Draco Malfoy is a defected Death Eater?"

"Yes, I am."

"And the two of you … you're …" She gulped again. "You're together?"

Hermione sighed but still held Ginny's gaze. "Yes, we are."

Ginny exhaled loudly and whispered, "Holy shit." She stood back up and began pacing around the room. "I can't believe this. I can't *fucking* believe this," she muttered to herself. "Ron's not going to believe this. And Harry … he's *definitely* not going to fucking -"

"Harry's here?" asked Hermione, scrambling to her feet and hurrying towards Ginny. "He's … he's all right?"

"Yes, of course," said Ginny, stopping her pacing. "Why?"

Hermione blushed and looked to the floor. "Well, it's just … Draco told me no one on their side has seen him since the Battle of Hogwarts and I … Well, I guess I sort of started to fear that he was dead or deathly ill or something."

Ginny went white. "By Merlin, you don't … I didn't even think about …"

"I don't what?" asked Hermione.

Ginny looked up at her and quickly said, "Nothing."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Can I see him?"

"That's not a good -"

"I want to see him, Ginny."

Ginny frowned. "Her -" She caught herself and gulped. "Granger …" she said with a heavy heart. "… that's not a good idea."

Hermione crossed her arms and slowly walked towards her mattress. She sunk down onto it and folded her legs beneath her. "I am not answering any more questions unless they are asked by Harry."

Ginny could not fight off her smirk. "It really is you, isn't it?"

Hermione smirked back. "Yes, Ginny. It really *is* me."

Ginny nodded. "All right. I'll see what I can do." She headed for the door.

"Ginny, wait!"

She turned back around just in time to be smothered by Hermione's hair while she wrapped her arms around her.

"We didn't get to do this before since you were so busy using a Stunning Spell on me."

Ginny's eyes began to tear as she slowly lifted her arms to hug Hermione back. They were only able to do this for a moment before Ginny hurried out of the room, not wanting the other witch to see her cry. She wiped at her eyes in the corridor while her three comrades watched, Dean even going as far as handing her a tissue.

While she had been skeptical before, that hug was the last thing Ginny needed to know for sure. There was now absolutely no doubt in Ginny's mind that the girl in that room was none other than Hermione Granger.

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Ginny hesitated outside of the door and took a deep breath. This was not going to be easy and she knew it, but she had to do it. He had to know.

Finding her courage, she suddenly reached out for the door handle and pulled the door open, going inside and shutting it behind her.

"Ginny!" Harry shot straight up in his seat as she entered. It seemed he had been stuck in that same trance-like state since she had left. "What's happening? Is it still her or did she …" he gulped. "… did she revert to another form?"

Ginny looked into his green eyes and sighed. "No, it's still her."

Harry let out a breath of relief. "And the antidote?"

Grabbing a chair, Ginny moved it and set it beside him. She sat down and took his hands in hers. "No effect."

Harry went white. "Veritaserum?"

"I was going to use it, but then she confessed to me that she's been practicing Occlumency. She, apparently, wasn't planning to use it. She just wanted to be honest."

Now Harry could not help but smile. "That sounds like our Her - Granger." He paused. "I can't believe we finally find her and we can't even call her by her name."

Ginny frowned and squeezed his hand. "There's something you should know."

Harry went white again. "Oh God, what is it? Is she hurt? Is she dying? Please don't tell me she's dying!"

Now Ginny smirked. "No, but she seems to think you might be."

Harry raised his eyebrows in curiosity.

"I'll get to that later," said Ginny. She paused and thought hard about the best way to go about this. "Malfoy, he … he referred to her as his girlfriend."

Harry's raised eyebrows quickly furrowed. "What?"

"Yes. He said it so casually that I don't think it was meant to get a rise out of us. And he was being rather difficult until she … well, until she told him to just cooperate. And he listened, Harry. He actually sucked it up and listened to her."

"So what are you saying?" asked Harry, trying to pull his hand away, but Ginny held on tight.

"I'm saying that our friend, our best friend who we have been searching for for almost five years, is here with us now, claiming that Draco Malfoy is a defected Death Eater." Ginny paused. "And I believe her."

Harry successfully pulled his hand away. He began pulling at his hair in frustration before slamming his elbows into the table in front of him. "When did she escape?"

"About four months ago. Four days before the curfew went into effect."

"And how long has she been with … with *him*?"

"She said he found her three days after she escaped. She had been staying at his flat ever since. But five days ago You-Know-Who found out about her and they fled."

"And how did they -?"

"That's all I know, Harry. She refused to answer any more questions unless they come from you."

Harry's jaw dropped slightly. "Me? She … she wants to see me?"

Ginny smiled. "Of course she does. She thought since no one from the other side has seen you in all of this time that you might be dead or ill or something."

"And what did you tell her?" he asked, his face tensing as he glanced down at his legs.

"Nothing," she answered. "Just that I would talk to you."

Harry nodded and began clutching at his trousers. "I want to see her."

"Are you sure?" asked Ginny, putting her hand on top of his.

He nodded again. "But I don't want her to know. Not yet."

"Yes, of course."

Ginny took out her wand and pointed it at Harry's legs. A string of white light flowed out of it and into them. When she pulled her wand away, Harry began wiggling his knees. She stood up first and helped him to his feet.

"Are you ready for this?" she asked.

Harry smiled. "I've been ready for this for almost five years. I just really hope it's her."

"It is," said Ginny. "Now, whether or not she is in her right mind … that's still up for debate."

Back in her room, Hermione was still sitting on her mattress, chewing on her hair nervously while Draco spoke to her about one thing or another. She had

successfully honed her ears in his direction, so at least they did not need to shout.

"Granger, are you listening?"

"Yes," she said automatically.

"Then what did I just say?"

"You were talking about keeping my guard up no matter who comes in or how happy I am to see them."

"Right, because we really have no idea what these people are thinking or what they're capable of."

"They're thinking that I'm under a spell," said Hermione with a chuckle.

"I wonder what they think the ruthless Death Eater, Draco Malfoy, would gain by bewitching Harry Potter's right-hand Mudblood into shagging him?" Draco said disdainfully. "If I was the chauvinist they believe I am then wouldn't that repulse me?"

"One would think."

"I suppose it's easier to believe than the truth."

Hermione smiled. "Not if they knew you." There was some shuffling in the hallway outside of her door and Hermione's ears went on full alert. Then it was silent again. She sighed and focused on Draco once more. "Do you think they'll really let me see Harry?"

"I don't see why not."

"Something seemed … off though, didn't it? When I asked Ginny about him?"

"You mean when she began muttering to herself and seemed like she was going to say 'you don't know'?"

"Yes."

A pause. "I'm sure he's fine, Granger."

Just then, Hermione could hear several voices entering the hallway. She removed her ears from Draco and focused on them.

"Have they been cooperative while I've been gone?" asked the voice of Ginny.

"Yes, but they keep talking to each other like they're in the same bloody room or something," answered Dean. "It's getting weird."

"So she can do that ear thing too?"

"What ear thing?"

Hermione's heart nearly stopped. She knew that voice. It haunted her dreams, her nightmares, was present during some of the best memories of her life … and some of the worst. It was the voice of her best friend. And, even after all of these years, it sounded just the same. Maybe a little deeper, a little older, but it was still … "Harry?"

Her ears were still sharpened and she could hear the faint sound of his head turning towards her door.

"She mentioned some spell where they are able to hone in on conversations."

A brief pause. Then she could hear Harry's head turn back towards Ginny. "They know wandless magic?"

"It would seem," answered Ginny.

"I want to go in now," said Harry.

Hermione struggled to quickly get to her feet, running her fingers through her hair and straightening her jumper so she would look halfway decent.

"Remember, Granger, keep your guard up," said Draco's faint voice. "Ask him a question, make sure it's him first. Got it?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'm taking the spell off my ears now."

"All right. I'll be listening."

The door to her room opened and Hermione froze. Her breath caught in the back of her throat as one of the mask-wearers walked in first, followed by Dean, who had taken his mask off, and then Ginny. Behind her, she could just make out the messy black hair of someone very dear to her.

"Bind her," Ginny ordered.

The mask-wearer stepped forward and pulled out his wand just as Ginny moved out of the way and Harry came into view. He and Hermione locked eyes, neither

knowing quite what to make of the other. Hermione's throat swelled as she was unable to find her words.

Before the mask-wearer had a chance to bind her, Hermione instinctually grabbed his arms and flipped him over her shoulder, making him land with a loud thump. She grabbed his wand and pointed it right at Harry.

"Whoa!" shouted Dean.

"Shit!" Ginny pulled out her wand and aimed it at Hermione.

"In our fifth year, you and I led Dolores Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest under the false pretense that we knew of some weapon Professor Dumbledore was hiding in there. Where did I lead her really?"

"Umm …" Harry's eyes had become wide with fright, but he quickly shook his head and gathered his bearings. "To the centaurs. Not your … smartest plan ever." He gave a weak smile.

"Yes, I recall you telling me something similar at the time." Hermione lowered the wand she was holding and handed it back to the person she had flipped, who was still on the ground, mask halfway off. "Sorry, Terry."

Terry Boot snatched his wand back and hurried to his feet. He quickly bound her. The sound of Draco's bellowing laughter could be heard echoing through the hallway.

"Be quiet," she whispered harshly.

Draco's laughter slowly began to fade.

Hermione looked back at Harry and sighed. "Sorry, I … I just had to be sure. I wouldn't put this sort of sick trick past You-Know-Who."

Harry gave a shallow nod.

"You can ask me something too, if you would like."

"That's all right," he said. "I believe it's you. Just …"

"You think I'm under a spell."

Harry said nothing, all the while keeping his eyes steadily fixed on hers, almost like he was afraid if he let her gaze go, she would disappear again.

"Well, I'm not," said Hermione. "Draco is defected. He has been for years. And if he had not found me and helped me when he did, there is no way I would be standing here in front of you now. I would be dead."

Harry's legs began to shake. He broke their gaze briefly to look down at them and then at Ginny. She pursed her lips and nodded.

Looking back at Hermione, Harry said, "We have a list of potential defected Death Eaters. Malfoy is at the bottom of it."

"Yes, I suppose he would be," said Hermione. "That just proves that he has done his job well. He's been helping you for -"

"*How*?" he snapped. "How has he been helping us?"

Hermione crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "Well, if you would let me talk for one moment I could tell you!" she said with a huff.

One of Harry's knees buckled and he stumbled on his feet a bit. He pressed himself against the wall and used it to brace himself.

Hermione dropped her arms as she stared at him curiously. "Harry, what is wrong with your -?"

"I want to talk to Malfoy," he said, looking at Ginny before stumbling out of the room.

"Wait!" shouted Hermione, trying to follow after him. "What is wrong with your legs, Harry?"

Terry grabbed her wrist and threw her back into the room. He, Ginny and Dean slipped out and shut the door, locking it behind them.

In the hallway, Harry collapsed to the floor.

"Sorry," said Ginny, falling to her knees beside him and putting her wand to his legs. "My concentration must have been weak when I -"

"It's not the spell, Ginny! It's me," said Harry, his voice becoming weak and strained.

Ginny sighed and watched as the white light went into his legs. When she was finished, Terry and Dean each grabbed one of Harry's arms and helped him to his feet.

"It should hold for longer this time," she said, rising with him. "Are you really going in to see Malfoy?"

"Yes," he answered. "You stay here and watch Her -" Harry closed his eyes and sighed. "I don't want to call her Granger."

"But shouldn't I be there when you -"

"No," said Harry, snapping his eyes back open. "I don't want you anywhere near him. Not if he knows wandless magic."

"But if he wanted to escape he would have done it already," said Ginny.

"Yes, and that's what worries me."

Harry grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze before walking towards the door Draco Malfoy was behind. Dean and Terry put their masks back on and followed him to where the third mask-wearer was keeping guard, already waiting for them with the key. He unlocked the door and he, Dean and Terry entered first, all taking various positions around the room as Harry followed them inside.

Draco was sitting in the corner with his legs out in front of him. His wrists were still bound and resting comfortably on his lap. As Harry walked in, he could not help but smile.

"Well, well, well. A visit from the infamous Harry Potter himself. Do what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You know perfectly well why I'm here, Malfoy," Harry spat. "What did you do to her?"

"Who says I did anything?"

"Obviously you must have -"

"Yes, *obviously*," Draco scoffed. "I have better things to do with my time."

Harry sneered at him. "If you truly ran away from You-Know-Who and escaped London, then why haven't we seen any wanted posters of you?"

Draco shrugged. "I doubt the Dark Lord wants to draw attention to the fact that one of his most trusted Death Eater's has betrayed him. Getting me back is an inside job. Though, I am sure once he does, my execution will be very public."

"And what makes you think we'll let you go back to him so easily?"

"You mean it hasn't crossed your mind to use me as some sort of bargaining chip?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow. "I find that highly unlikely. Even Saint Potter has his weaknesses. So who is it you want back? If you tell me then I can let you know if you're wasting your time or not. But, to be honest, you most likely are. The Dark Lord keeps few prisoners. Aside from Granger, that is. She was the exception. Most others in her former position have absolutely nothing to do with the resistance."

"And you really expect me to believe that you willingly helped her escape?"

Draco smirked. "I never said I helped her escape, and neither did she. I had nothing to do with that, actually. I hadn't even seen her since the Battle of Hogwarts when I found her on the streets, being attacked by filthy civilians who think they're owed something simply for existing.

"Funny how people can think that."

Draco's face stiffened. "Yes, hilarious." He cleared his throat. "As I was saying, she escaped herself. Seems she had to, considering your bloody arse never came looking for her. At least Weasel tried, I'll give him that, but where the fuck have you been all this time, Potter?"

Harry's heart sank as his green eyes fell to the floor. "That's not what's important."

"Isn't it, though?" said Draco with a sneer. "Shouldn't you be less concerned with how she might have feelings for someone who has risked their life to help her, and more concerned with how she might have lost her feelings for the boy who left her behind?"

"Harry, don't listen to him," said Dean, who was in the corner farthest from Draco. "Granger will understand that you couldn't go out there. Once you explain -"

"Explain what, exactly?" asked Draco. Just then, his ears honed in on the high-pitched voice that was yelling at him. He smirked. "It seems she's mad at me for speaking so rudely towards you, Potter. She says that I should stop with this schoolyard rivalry and just cooperate." A pause. "And she would also like me to ask what is wrong with your legs?"

Draco looked at them and Harry blushed, pressing himself against the wall.

"They reek of magic."

"Why don't you mind your own fucking business, Malfoy?" spat the voice behind one of the masks that he had come to recognize as someone named Terry. They pointed their wand fervently at him.

Draco lifted his bound hands defensively. "No need to get upset, I was simply repeating what the lady asked," he said. "Everyone here is so bloody sensitive."

"Let's get to the point, Malfoy," said Harry, raising his eyes once more. "Have you or have you not cast a spell on Her - Granger?"

Draco looked him straight in the eye and very clearly said, "I have not," before lowering his arms again and leaning back against the wall. "Shouldn't you just be happy that you have your friend back, instead of fretting over the fact that she didn't wait for your precious Weasley? It's been almost five fucking years. Move on. She did."

"You are not one one-hundredth of the man Ron is!" spat Terry.

"You sure are hostile. Did I do something to offend you?" asked Draco, pursing his eyebrows.

"Fucking Death Eaters killed my family!"

"Yes, we kill a lot of people. Was it me specifically, or something?"

"I don't fucking know!"

"Well, for your sake, I hope it was. I am much more generous than most."

"Is that what you were on bloody New Year's when you beheaded that girl?" asked Dean. "*Generous*?"

Draco moved his eyes to him. "I made it quick, didn't I? Do you think someone like Bellatrix would have been so swift about it?" His head sunk a little. "Not everyone is capable of being saved."

When Draco lifted his head again, the third mask-wearer standing in the closest corner was staring at him. He had been for a while now. There was something familiar about his eyes, but Draco could not quite place him. Probably another fucking Gryffindor or something.

"What's with the bloody masks, anyway?" he asked. "It's a bit 'Death Eater', don't you think?"

"Yes, and while Death Eaters like to conceal their identities, so do we," said Terry, still aiming his wand at him.

"Why? The only one of you of any importance to me isn't wearing a mask. I could care less about 'Dean' and 'Terry' and 'Soft-Spoken Stranger'."

Soft-Spoken Stranger chuckled a bit. Terry shot him a sharp glance.

Draco rolled his eyes and began tapping his fingers on his legs. "Look, I haven't cast any bloody spells on Granger, and I haven't given her any potions. She is normal, at least for her, and she's come a long way to bloody find you, Potter, so why don't you stop wasting your fucking time with me and go and speak to your best friend? I haven't unbound myself, I'm fucking cooperating, as best I can with you bloody gits, anyway, so just leave me be for now. Or throw me out. I don't fucking care. Just give her what she's fucking been waiting for!"

Harry stared back at him, mouth agape and eyes unblinking. He was right. He could not believe he was even thinking it, but Draco Malfoy was right. What was he doing here, when Hermione was right there, waiting for him in the other room? He had not even hugged her yet.

Harry was just about to say something when Terry shouted, "Don't listen to him, Harry! It's a trick! Granger is fucking brainwashed! She has to be! And the moment we let her distract us, he's going to try something!"

"How dare you talk about her that way!" spat Draco. "While the likes of you may be feebleminded enough to let that happen, Granger would *never* let anyone fucking brainwash her! She's better than that, you fucking -"

"*Crucio*!"

Draco was unprepared for the curse, and cried out in pain as his already twisted insides burned.

Hermione jumped up in her room immediately. "No," she whispered to herself."

And then she heard it again. "*Crucio*!"

"NO!" she screamed, running for the door and banging on it. "Ginny! Ginny, let me out! Please, please, don't let them curse him! *Please*!" she cried.

No one from the other side answered.

Hermione continued to bang and kick, cursing at the door and trying to summon

any wandless magic she could muster. Until, suddenly, it burst open. Ginny stood wide-eyed on the other side. Her wand immediately shot up.

Hermione held her bound hands up defensively. "Ginny, please, just hear me out! They … they can't torture him like that."

"And why not -?"

"Because of your stupid brother!"

Ginny's mouth dropped a little as she looked greatly offended.

"When he and the others attacked London on New Year's and tried to abduct Draco, he got punished for it, all right? You-Know-Who was angry, and he used the Cruciatus Curse on Draco thirty-nine times. He survived and he started to heal, but then, when we escaped, he blocked a curse from hitting me and he's been sick ever since. His insides are bleeding, Ginny. That's why I was brewing that potion in our tent. Please … please, you have to stop them from hurting him more!"

Ginny blinked. "Ron … attacked London on New Year's?"

Hermione pursed her eyebrows. "Yes, he did. I … I assumed you knew."

Ginny shook her head and lowered her eyes. "He came to Harry with the idea, but Harry promised me that he wasn't going to let him go through with it. That fucking little …"

"Ginny … matter at hand, please."

Raising her eyes to meet Hermione's, Ginny sighed but kept her wand aimed high.

"Ginny … please," Hermione pleaded, her voice becoming desperate. "It's me. I promise it is. And Draco … I know it's hard to believe, but he's everything to me. I … I can't lose him. Not like this. I don't want a reason to hate all of you when I just got you back."

Ginny sighed again and stared at Hermione's bound wrists. She waved her wand at them, vanishing the ropes, before lowering it. "Harry's going to kill me."

Hermione ran forward and gave her friend a hug. "Thank you," she said quickly before running towards the door Draco was still screaming behind. She threw it open, aimed her hand at Terry and shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

His wand flew out of his hand and into hers. She used it to knock him backwards and went to stand protectively in front of Draco.

"That's enough!" she shouted. "And here I had actually been wondering why Draco was so hesitant to expose himself before now! But, with a greeting like *this*, who can blame him?"

"What are you doing in here?" asked Harry, his eyes wide with surprise as he turned around and looked at Ginny in the doorway.

She took a deep breath and muttered something about not believing she was doing this, before going over and standing by Hermione. She raised her own wand and pointed it at Terry, who was trying to stand.

"Ginny … why -?"

"I told you before that I believed her when she said he was defected," said Ginny. "Maybe I'm wrong, I have been before, but if there is even a slight chance that I'm right then this is not the way we should be handling this. Our friend is here, Harry, and she's asking us to trust her."

"Don't listen to her!" shouted Terry. "He must have a spell, Harry! He must have gotten Ginny too! He must have -"

"*Silencio*!" shouted the third mask-wearer, pointing his wand at Terry. Dean moved to retaliate, but he quickly shouted, "*Expelliarmus*!" sending his wand flying into his hand.

"Ernie, what are you doing?" asked Harry, who was fidgeting with his own wand, unsure if he wanted to aim it at anyone or not.

"Sorry, mate," said Ernie Macmillan, taking off his mask and looking down at Draco, who had managed to pull himself back to a seated position. Ernie winked.

"You," Draco said weakly. "Y-you made it back."

"Ernie, what is he talking about?" asked Ginny, who was still pointing her wand at Terry while Hermione kept hers on Dean.

"Uh, yeah, remember when I was captured last year and I said someone helped me escape but I didn't know who?"

"Yeah …" she said.

"Well, surprise, I lied! It was Malfoy."

"Oh, Ernie! You're 'Unidentified Hufflepuff'!" exclaimed Hermione, recalling the list she and Draco had made together. "*Really*, Draco? You couldn't even remember Ernie's name? He was in our year!"

Draco shrugged and smirked. "Yes, and I'm still trying to put faces to this 'Dean' and 'Terry' who I believe were in our year, as well."

"Why did you lie?" asked Harry, holding his wand still now but not aiming it.

"Why?" repeated Ernie. "Because Draco Malfoy is defected. Do you have any idea how much information like that is worth? I wasn't about to risk the life of the person who saved me just so you all could have a more thorough explanation."

"Don't listen to him, Harry!" shouted Terry, who had somehow found his voice. "Malfoy must have gotten to him too!"

Ernie rolled his eyes. "Oh, shut it, Terry. Malfoy hasn't put a bloody spell on anyone. But if you really don't believe me then ask my girlfriend. She's the only one I told about him."

"I … don't know," said Harry, staring down at his wand.

"You *really* need more proof?" spat Hermione. "Then do me a favor and call Andromeda. I am sure she will gladly vouch for him!"

Harry lifted his head. "How did you know -?"

"Because she used her phone to call my mother for me when I saw her at Christmas! Her, Cho, Oliver, Kennil, Dennis, Teddy! They've *all* been keeping Draco's secret and, in return, he's been keeping them safe! Call her!"

Harry hesitated for only a moment before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small phone. He pressed a few keys and brought it to his ear.

"Speakerphone, Harry," said Ginny.

Harry nodded and brought it down before pressing another button.

"Hello?" answered the sleepy voice of Cho. Hermione could not help but notice as Ginny openly sneered at the phone.

"Cho, it's Harry. Is Andromeda there?"

"Harry? Why are you calling so late? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything is fine. Please, just put Andromeda on. It's important."

There was some rustling before another voice clearly said, "Harry? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just … that person who's been keeping you safe in London and … and giving you information for the last couple of years. That wasn't …" Harry gulped. "It wasn't Draco Malfoy … was it?"

Silence. "Harry, is Draco there with you?"

Harry hesitated before saying, "Yes."

"Oh, thank Godric! We've all been so worried! And Granger? She's there too?"

"They're both here," said Harry, glancing up at Hermione.

"Put Draco on, will you? I need to speak with him."

"But -"

"Put him on, Harry dear," she said in an authoritative voice.

Harry stepped forward and carefully moved past Hermione and Ginny to hand the phone to Draco. He took it and, in the clearest voice he could muster said, "Andromeda?"

"Oh, Draco, I'm so happy to hear your voice! We were so worried! Bronson came by and told us what happened! Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. We're both fine," he said, glancing up at Hermione.

"And what of Harry and them? They haven't hurt you, have they? Oh, if they have touched one hair on your head then they will have another thing coming when I get back there!"

Draco chuckled, which made his insides ache. "No, they haven't," he lied, "but they don't seem to believe that I'm on their side either."

"Yes, well, perhaps in another life you should have been an actor, because you really do put on a great show. Am I on speakerphone?" she asked.

"I believe that's what this is, yes," he answered.

"All right then. Harry, you listen here and you listen good! Draco Malfoy is defected. He has been working against You-Know-Who for years and helping our side in any way he can. He is in no way innocent, but none of us are. In fact, now that he's there, I think it's time that you know something else. Hold on one second."

There was some more rustling before another groggy voice came on and said, "Hello?"

Harry, Ginny, Terry, Dean and Ernie all shot their heads towards the phone and froze.

"Neville?" said Harry, unsure if his ears were working correctly.

"Harry?" said Neville, suddenly sounding much more alert. "Yeah, mate, it's me!"

"How long have you been there?" asked Harry.

"A couple of weeks. Since just after Christmas."

"And how did you get there?"

"Uhh …"

"Go on and tell him the truth," said Andromeda's voice in the background. "Malfoy and Granger are there."

"Oh, all right. Malfoy found me," said Neville. "Rabastan Lestrange put me under the Imperius Curse and was using me to get information from Mundungus. He took the curse off and faked my death with that spell … remember that spell? The one where we thought people were dead but about thirty minutes later they would pop up alive? That's his."

"Thank you, Neville," said Andromeda, obviously taking the phone back. "Satisfied?" she said into it.

"Yes," Harry said weakly.

"Draco, are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here," he answered.

"Be safe, all right? And don't worry about us. Bronson and Quigley are taking care of us for the time being."

Draco smirked. "I'll try not to. And tell the kid to behave himself until I get back."

"I'm not sure if you mean Teddy or Dennis," she said with a laugh.

"Perhaps you should just tell them both."

"All right, goodnight, Draco. I love you."

With a genuine smile, Draco said, "I love you too, Andromeda."

"Draco …"

"*Aunt* Andromeda," he corrected with a roll of his eyes.

"Take care of him, Granger!"

Hermione smiled. "I will," she said.

Draco handed the phone back to Harry, who pressed a button to hang it up.

"So … you're really on our side?" said Harry, looking at Draco.

"Looks like it," he answered.

"You can lower your wands," said Harry, putting his away. "No one's going to attack him." He looked firmly from Terry to Dean. They both nodded in compliance.

Ginny lowered her wand, and Ernie gave Dean back his while Hermione tossed hers at Terry. She turned and kneeled down to check on Draco.

"Are you all right?" she asked, rubbing her hands along his chest.

"I'm fine," he said, putting his hands on top of hers. "It was just a little torture. Nothing I can't handle."

"But you've already endured so much," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Endured so much? Why?" asked Ernie.

"Well, *apparently*," said Ginny, eyes shooting towards Harry, "he was tortured numerous times after Ron tried to capture him on New Year's. Funny how that happened, isn't it? Considering how you *swore* to me that you were going to tell him *not* to go through with that stupid idea!"

Harry blushed and quickly glanced away from her. "I did tell him that but you know

your brother. He's going to do what he wants, whether I say it's all right or not."

Ginny grunted. "Git."

"Granger, I'm fine!" shouted Draco as she pulled at his jumper, checking for any cuts or bruises. "Just go and see Potter already, will you? That's why we're here, isn't it?"

Hermione looked into his gray eyes and sighed. "But you're hurt."

"Yes, but it can wait. Go share a hug or something, and then you can worry about me all you want. All right?"

Hermione nodded and kissed his cheek. She stood back up and turned towards Harry, slowly walking towards him. "Harry, I … I don't expect you to understand," she said, stopping in front of him, "but I -"

"Don't," said Harry, lifting his hand to stop her. "It's not important right now. But you … you're really here?"

Hermione smiled softly and said, "Yes. And so are you."

Tears flooded both of their eyes as they looked at each other. Harry moved first, throwing his arms around her shoulders and pulling her into him, surprised at how, after all of this time, she still hugged exactly the same. Smelled exactly the same. Even her bushy hair tickled him exactly the same.

"Harry, I've missed you," she cried while squeezing him tight. "I've missed you so much."

"Me too," he said, large tears falling from his eyes and into her hair. "Me too."

Just then, a loud gagging sound came from behind him.

"Fuck!" shouted Terry. "What's wrong with him?"

Hermione and Harry let go of each other and looked to see Draco hunched over the floor, coughing up a large pool of blood. And it wasn't stopping.

"Draco!" Hermione ran towards him and grabbed his head, cradling it in her lap. "Draco, no! Hold on, all right? Please, just hold on!"

"G-Granger," he said through choked breaths, lifting his hand to stroke her cheek. "I-I -"

Draco turned his head sideways as another round of vomit and blood fell from his mouth.

"The potion!" shouted Hermione, looking up at Ginny. "I need the potion that was brewing in our tent! It should be ready now!"

Ginny nodded and began heading for the door.

"Wait!" said Harry, grabbing her arm. "Snatchers will be all over that mountain at this hour. You can't go out there now!"

"But he *needs* our help, Harry! We can't just leave him -"

"I'll go," said Ernie.

"No," Harry said sternly. "I already told you. It's too risky. It's -"

"And I already told *you* that I owe him my life. I'm going with or without your approval. Hopefully with so that I can borrow your cloak."

Harry hesitated for a moment, but then he looked at Hermione, who was crying as she rocked Draco in her arms. He clutched onto her weakly, looking up at her with eyes that made Harry question everything he ever knew about the wizard. Finally, he nodded at Ernie and said, "You know where it is."

"Thank you," said Ernie before running out the door.

"Dean, Terry, grab his arms and legs. We're moving him to the medical wing," ordered Harry as soon as Ernie was gone.

They both nodded and Hermione moved aside so that they could pick him up, but Draco grabbed onto her hand and pulled her along with him.

"D-don't l-leave m-me," he whispered.

Hermione shook her head. "Never."

Harry stayed back as they moved, his legs shaking beneath him. As soon as they were gone, he collapsed. Ginny moved forward and caught him, slowing his descent towards the ground before taking her wand back out and pointing it at his legs.

"I have never been more thankful to have Ron away," said Ginny as the strings of white light went from the tip of her wand into his legs.

"Same here," said Harry, staring out the doorway Hermione had just gone through.

"You lied to me about that too, didn't you?" she said accusingly. "He's not following some lead on Muggles hiding out up north. He's in London looking for her, isn't he?"

Harry sighed and said, "Yes."

"You better hope Malfoy doesn't die," said Ginny, finishing the spell and putting her wand away. "If he does then we're only going to lose her all over again. And, this time, she won't be coming back."

"I know," said Harry, who had never understood something so clearly in his entire life. His best friend was back, and there was no way in hell he was going to lose her again. Which was why Draco Malfoy was not going to die on his watch. Not tonight. Not ever. As much as it pained him to make that promise to himself.

# Chapter 29: I'm Only Sleeping

**A/N: Shorter chapter, I know. But there was a certain place I wanted to end it and I don't think you'll be disappointed. ;o)**

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When Draco opened his eyes again, he was in a room with a blinding white light. The faint silhouette of a woman sat on the edge of the bed he was lying in. The light made it impossible to see her face.

"Granger?"

"No," said a soothing voice Draco could not soon forgot. His heart stopped as a gentle hand lifted off of the bed and began to stroke his cheek. "It's just me, Draco."

"M-mother?" he asked, unsure if he could trust his ears.

His eyes began to adjust to the light and it became clear that the hair of the woman beside him was golden. Then he could make out her face. Bright blue eyes staring at him with a softness no one else ever knew. Most viewed Narcissa Malfoy as cold, but not Draco. All he ever saw was warmness when he looked at her.

"Mother, what are you doing here? What am I …?" Draco began to look around. Suddenly, the white light became all too significant. He shot up from his bed. "Shit, am I dead?"

"Language, Draco," said Narcissa, carefully pushing him back down on the bed. "And of course you're not dead. That girl of yours would never let that happen."

"Her name is -"

"I know her name. Hermione."

Draco cringed as he began to look around in a panic.

"Don't worry, darling. The Dark Lord cannot get you here. You can say what you like."

Draco sank back into his bed, but his eyes were still on full alert.

"Relax, Draco. You never just relax anymore."

"Can you blame me?" he asked, looking back up at her.

Narcissa frowned. "No, I suppose not." She reached down and stroked a strand of hair out of his eyes.

"Where are we, Mother?" he asked. "If I'm not dead then … I must be dreaming, right?"

"No," said Narcissa. "This is very real, Draco. You were so close to death that your spirit left the land of the living. It is dancing on the edge of the veil, but it will not go through."

"So this is the veil we're in?"

"Yes. It is the one place we are able to speak. That is, until you cross over completely."

Draco gulped.

Narcissa smiled. "Don't worry, Dearest. It is not your time yet. I checked. You still have too much left to do in the land of the living before you can come here permanently. You made promises, remember?"

Draco nodded softly. "And you're … you're all right with me being in love … with a Mudblood?"

Narcissa sighed and stroked his cheek. "In another time, I will not deny that it would have greatly troubled me, but I have been watching you over the years, Draco. You have been miserable. Until the day she reentered your life. How could I deny you these feelings when all I have ever wanted is for you to be happy?"

Draco cocked an eyebrow, looking at his mother questioningly. "Has death messed with your brain or something?"

Narcissa smiled. "No."

"The mother I grew up with never would have spoken like this."

"Well, the mother you grew up with had more concern for herself and status than she should have. Draco, if I could do it all over again there are a lot of things I would change. Mainly, I would never forget what is most important, and that's family."

Draco grunted and sat up in his bed. "I don't mean to knock this new revelation of yours, but I am pretty positive Hermione is more important than Father or Bellatrix."

"Yes, because she's your family. Some families you are born into, and others you create. I do not expect you to show mercy towards my sister, but do not dismiss your father so easily. Everything he has done since the day I died has been for you."

"Are you telling me that he raped the girl I'm in love with for *me*? Well now, wouldn't that be a sick twist of fate."

Narcissa sighed again and stood up from his bed, going over and staring out of the window, but all Draco could see was white light. But her eyes told him there was more. So, so much more. "Perhaps you should ask that girl of yours more about that story. It might do you both some good."

"I'll pass," said Draco, rubbing at his aching chest. That was funny. It had not hurt before.

"She is trying to wake you," said Narcissa, turning back towards him. She hurried over to the bed. "Draco, when you wake up, you won't remember this. Not as something real, anyway. Perhaps you will remember you dreamt of me, but nothing more."

Draco nodded slowly.

Narcissa leaned down and pulled him into a hug. "It is not your time yet, my son. But, please, be careful. I do not want to see you here before you have time to live your life properly with the one who makes you happy. And, if you keep heading down the path you are on, that is exactly what is going to happen. Trust in your new acquaintances. They *will* help you when the time comes."

Draco nodded again.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"Keep each other safe," she whispered into his ear.

Just then, Draco felt the room and his mother being sucked away from him. Everything became dark but, while he could not see anything, he could still feel a presence. And then there was a voice.

"Draco, please wake up!"

Something wet fell onto his cheek and a soft hand stroked it off.

"M-mother?" he said as his eyelashes began to flutter.

"*What*?" screeched a rather irritated sounding voice. "Did you just call me your bloody mother? Snap out of it!"

His neck jerked as something stung his face.

"Honestly, I've been asking you to rest for days and *now* is when you decide to actually listen."

"I was not unconscious by choice," said Draco, rubbing at his cheek with his bound hands before slowly opening his eyes. He was in a bed. Not a particularly comfortable one but it would do. Hermione was sitting on the edge of it, looking down at him with concerned eyes while Potter and Weaselette watched him over her shoulder. Then Harry began to shake and Ginny quickly helped him into a chair.

Draco looked at his bound wrists and frowned.

"Just undo it, Draco," said Hermione. She turned and looked at Ginny and Harry harshly. "He's not exactly in any condition to escape. Nor does he want to."

Draco smirked before waving his fingers and vanishing the binds. "Remind me to teach you all how to properly bind a Death Eater once I am feeling better."

Harry looked at him coldly but Ginny nodded. At least one person here seemed to want to better themselves.

"Why did you call me 'Mother'?" asked Hermione, obviously worried that he had been closer to death than she had realized.

"I … think I was dreaming about her," said Draco, trying hard to recall.

"Oh, and how is the insufferable chauvinist these days?" asked Ginny, pulling up a chair next to Harry.

"Dead," said Draco.

Ginny's eyes went wide as she suddenly looked like she wanted to bite her tongue off.

"My aunt killed her during the Battle of Hogwarts."

Hermione frowned and grabbed Draco's hand in hers.

Ginny went white. "It seemed your aunt was busy killing a lot of peoples' mothers that day."

"Your implication would suggest that she killed yours as well?" asked Draco, trying to squeeze Hermione's hand in reassurance, not realizing that he was too weak to even do this one small gesture properly.

"Yes, she did."

"I've sent Bellatrix into your traps several times over the years, but she always comes out unscathed," said Draco, looking up at Hermione.

"Draco suspects she has dark magic protecting her. You-Know-Who's doing, but he doesn't know for sure," said Hermione, stroking his hand with her thumb.

"Well, it's either that or you all are just really horrible at killing someone I handed to you on a silver platter."

Hermione smacked Draco's arm, but, when he cringed, she immediately became nurturing again. "It's not like you had any luck either, you know?" she said while trying to cast a Healing Spell on his arm. "Your Killing Curse went right at her." The spell was unsuccessful. "I don't suppose there is any chance you'll be giving me back my wand anytime soon?"

Harry and Ginny looked at each other uncomfortably.

Hermione sighed. "Then, Ginny, would you mind helping him? He needs something to hold him over until Ernie gets back."

"Granger, I'm fine -"

Just then, Draco started coughing uncontrollably. He leaned over the edge of the bed to stop the little droplets of blood from staining the white sheets. Ginny hurried over and pushed him upright, putting her wand to his chest and letting a soothing blue light seep into it. Draco let out a breath of relief.

"That feels fucking fantastic. What is that?"

"Just a little spell I picked up," said Ginny, putting her wand back in her pocket. She glanced at Hermione and then cast her eyes to the floor. "I've been training to become a Mediwitch. We can use all the ones we can get around here."

Hermione smiled and said, "That's great, Ginny." She knew that her old friend was trying to share something about her present life with her. She just wished she had

something to offer her in return but, until Draco, Hermione had not had much of a life.

"When the two of you escaped, did you manage to kill any Death Eaters?" Ginny asked suddenly. When Draco and Hermione both looked at her with raised eyebrows, she blushed. "It's just that I try to keep an updated list of all of the Death Eaters in specific areas. It would really help if I knew of any names I need to cross off."

"We did," said Draco, sinking back into his bed. "They were -"

"Just one second," said Ginny, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a small notebook and quill. She opened to one of the pages and crossed something off before writing something else. "All right, I've taken you off the list, Malfoy, and wrote 'defected' next to your name. Now, who else?"

"Rabastan Lestrange," said Draco. "Very much deceased." He looked at Hermione and the two shared a smile. "He was mine. Granger got Yaxley. Not quite as deceased, but deceased, none the less."

"How is someone not quite as deceased?" asked Harry from his seat.

"You don't want to know," said Draco. He and Hermione smiled again.

"Lestrange. Yaxley," repeated Ginny. "Anyone else?"

"Mathis Flint," said Hermione.

"And which one of you got him?" asked Harry.

Draco's face tensed as he quickly turned away from Hermione and stared at a spot on the floor. Hermione sighed. "Neither. Draco is not the only defected Death Eater. There are at least two others and one of them created a distraction so that we would have more time to escape. They killed Flint."

"Two others?" repeated Harry. "Who?"

Draco grunted. Hermione sighed again. "We can't tell you that."

"Why not?" asked Ginny, looking up from her notebook.

"For the same reason Ernie didn't tell you Draco was the one who helped him. Information like that is too valuable."

"But how will we know not to attack them?" asked Ginny.

"You won't," said Draco, finally looking back up and staring at her. "That's the whole bloody point. If you hesitate then the Dark Lord *will* notice. Not knowing is safer for everyone involved."

"Harry?"

They all turned to see Dean poking his head in through the door.

"Mr. Weasley is out here. He wants to know why you and Ginny are not in your rooms at this hour."

"And just *how* does he know we're not there?" asked Ginny, putting her notebook away and crossing her arms.

"Well, I'm *assuming* he checked," said Dean with a smirk.

"I'll talk to him, Gin," said Harry, moving to stand. But then he stopped and stared down at his legs.

"Just what *is* going on with you, Potter?" asked Draco, watching him curiously while Hermione did the same.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look. Ginny frowned before going over and putting her wand to his legs, releasing a white string of light into them.

"When You-Know-Who overpowered Harry and knocked him against that wall, something hit very wrong," said Ginny, looking sadly at her boyfriend's legs. "I was able to master this temporary fix I found, but it's weakening with time. Pretty soon it won't do anything for him anymore."

Ginny's eyes filled with tears as she looked up at Harry. He reached out and rubbed her hand. "You've done your best, Gin. That's all I can ask."

She nodded and he stood, kissing the top of her head before following Dean into the hallway.

Hermione had begun to cry on the bed. Draco reached out and grabbed her waist, pulling her into him so that he could comfort her properly.

"Aren't you a little old to have your father checking up on you?" asked Draco, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

"Yes, but he's become a bit overprotective since we lost Bill last year."

Draco's face dropped further. Mood not lightened.

"Bill's g-gone?" asked Hermione, wiping at her eyes as she cried even harder.

Ginny nodded. "And Percy three years ago. Not to mention my mum … He just feels we've had enough casualties for one family."

The door opened again and Harry walked back in. "He's gone, but he wants us both in bed shortly."

"I'm not going to bed, Harry," said Ginny. "Not until Ernie's back. But you … you have duties in the morning. You should go."

Harry blushed and looked over at Hermione. "I don't want to," he said.

"It's fine, Harry," said Hermione. "I promise I'm still going to be here when you wake up."

Harry nodded shallowly. "We're not … telling anyone about you two being here. Not yet," he said.

"I understand," said Hermione, looking at Draco. "It won't be easy to explain."

"Not to mention the people who will want to kill me on the spot," said Draco. Hermione gave him a stern look and he quickly shut his mouth.

"We'll figure it out tomorrow," said Harry. "Or … well, later today."

He moved to leave, but Hermione quickly called, "Harry, wait!"

Harry turned back around and looked into her familiar amber eyes. His heart nearly stopped beating every time he saw her. She was real. It was hard to believe it, but she really was real.

"What about …" She bit her lip. "What about Ron? Are you going to tell him I'm here?"

Harry noticed the way Draco tensed beside her. Then his eyes wandered to Draco's arms, which were wrapped securely - protectively around her waist. He still did not know what to make of this. It was too weird. So, for now, he just needed to focus on what was important. Hermione was here. And, luckily, Ron was not.

"He's not here right now. But, if you want, we can tell him as soon as he gets back."

Hermione nodded. "Yes. When is he back?"

"I don't know," said Harry with a shrug. Days would be preferable. Weeks even.

She nodded again and stood up, going over to Harry and giving him another hug. "Sleep well. I'll see you soon," she said before going back over and sitting next to Draco.

Harry just stared at her for a moment before finally turning and leaving.

"You should rest too," Ginny said to Draco as soon as he was gone.

"No," Hermione answered for him. "I don't want him going to sleep right now. Not until he takes the potion."

"But it might be a while," said Ginny. "This is the worst time of night for Ernie to be traveling. Some creatures in the forest are just going to bed while others are just waking up, not to mention the Snatchers in the mountains."

"But -"

"He needs rest. Orders from the Mediwitch," said Ginny with a smile. "I'll stay awake the entire time and I'm sure you will too. We'll make sure his heart is still beating."

Hermione looked at Draco and gulped.

"I'll be fine, Granger," he said. "The *Mediwitch* says so."

Hermione reluctantly nodded and said, "Okay." She helped Draco lie back down and tucked him in before kissing his cheek. "Stay with me, all right?" she whispered.

"All right," said Draco, closing his eyes and taking her hand. "Just as long as you stay with me."

Hermione smiled. "You're the one who wanted to stay behind, remember?"

"I recall no such thing."

Hermione used her free hand to stroke Draco's hair while he slowly drifted off to

sleep. Ginny used her wand to dim the lights, watching with interest as Hermione looked down at him with such adoration in her eyes. It was definitely a strange sight, but she was starting to believe that whatever this was the two of them had was not so terrible. She had met girls who had escaped slavery before, taken care of them afterwards, and none of them had been in as great a condition as Hermione, body or mind. So it seemed the Death Eater she had spent so many years despising had to have done something right.

<p style="text-align:center;">XXX</p>

Theo crinkled his nose as he looked around the disgusting flat that Draco used to call home. Blood and guts still splattered the walls, and rotting body parts were mixed in with rubble from the destroyed fireplace.

"Is no one *really* going to clean this up?" he asked, looking at his father.

"It is the next of kin's job to dispose of the body, and Rodolphus has made it very clear that he has no interest in returning here," answered Quincy.

"But it's disgusting."

"Not our problem, Theo. Remember, you don't live here anymore. Now, go and get your things so we can be rid of this shameful chapter of your life once and for all."

Theo narrowed his eyes at his father before walking towards Draco's guestroom. There was a rotting part of a leg in the doorway. He winced and quickly kicked it out of the way.

"So tell me again, Father," he called from the bedroom. "*Why* was I living with Draco?"

"Because he brainwashed you."

"Into thinking what, exactly?" he asked, poking his head back out of the doorway.

"It does not matter, Theo. Just hurry up so we can get out of here," said Quincy, pulling up his cloak to cover his nose.

Theo waved his wand at his father, temporarily taking away his sense of smell. Then he retreated back into the bedroom and began throwing everything that belonged to him onto the bed. Hidden at the very bottom of one of his drawers, he found an unregistered wand. He stared at it blankly for a moment before sighing and putting it in his pocket. Better not let his father see that one.

Theo packed his belongings quickly. When he went into the front room, his father was not there. He could hear him rummaging around in Draco's bedroom. Going over to the front closet, Theo dug through it and grabbed a cloak he had hanging up in there and several pairs of shoes. Merlin, he had a lot of shoes. Why had he never realized that before?

He was just about to stop his father from snooping where he did not belong when he noticed a blood-splattered book sitting on the coffee table. Theo slowly walked towards it, waving his new unregistered wand so that he could see the title. *Hogwarts: A History*. Staring back at Draco's bedroom to make sure his father was still occupied, Theo quickly grabbed the book and stuffed it into his bag. Then he went to get his father.

"What are you doing?" he asked, leaning against the doorframe, watching as his father leaned halfway into a drawer.

"If Draco is Imperiused like Lucius claims he is, then what do you think Potter's Mudblood was doing with this lovely number?" Quincy stood up straight and held up a small, green negligee.

Theo looked at it for a moment and shrugged. "Draco had slags here all the time. It could belong to anyone. Could be his for all we know. Who are we to knock others and their peculiar fetishes?" He smirked and left the room. "Let's go, Father."

Quincy grunted and followed him out. "Why is it that *you* seem to believe Draco is Imperiused? Is there something you are not telling me, *Son*?" he asked, grabbing harshly onto Theo's shoulder and whipping him around.

Theo stared down at his father's hand, grabbed his wrist and flicked it off of him. "No, Father. I've told you everything. But him being Imperiused is better than the alternative, isn't it? That he cursed me of his own freewill?"

Theo turned and opened the front door. Quincy pushed past him and walked out first. While his back was turned, Theo took out his regular wand and waved it at the flat, sending the rotting body parts of Rabastan Lestrange to his brother's drawing room. That would be a nice little surprise for him to take care of. Theo smirked to himself before following his father out and shutting the door behind him.

Theo struggled down the stairs while his father moved quickly. He was still in a great deal of pain from all of the torture he had endured, and the Dark Lord only allowed him limited healing. Pansy would sneak him potions whenever she could, but it was never enough.

Two floors below, Bronson was sitting in the hallway outside of his flat, having an early morning cigarette. He had been smoking even more often than usual this past week. Probably because he was constantly waiting for the day You-Know-Who came for him and Quigley. Really they should both just disappear, but where would they go? And without Fiona? Without Theo …?

Just then, he heard footsteps coming down the staircase. His eyes went wide with panic. There was no time to run back into his flat, so he just pressed himself against the wall as best he could, hoping whoever it was would not notice him.

"Would you hurry up, already? I don't want to be wasting any more bloody time here," said a man who looked vaguely familiar, stopping on his floor and staring up at someone.

"I'm fucking coming!" called a crude voice Bronson had become quite accustomed to.

His heart stopped, but he kept his face placid, especially when the man standing at the bottom of the stairs turned and looked at him, his eyes cold as they narrowed into thin slits. Bronson knew why he looked familiar now. It was because he looked like Theo, only older, lighter, and with less of a boyish quality to his features. And with everything Bronson knew about the wizard, he was absolutely hideous to him, and he very much doubted Theo got that cute little smirk of his from his father. This man probably never smirked.

Just to test it, Bronson smiled at him. His eyes only narrowed further.

"You know, it wouldn't hurt you to fucking help me or something, considering you just stood there while the Dark Lord tortured me and all," said Theo, holding onto the banister as he limped into view.

Quincy's head turned back towards his son. "How would you know what I did during a time you claim not to remember?"

"Your implications are getting old, Father," said Theo, tossing his suitcase into Quincy's arms. "Lucius told me. He said I shouldn't trust you. And -"

Theo suddenly stopped talking as his eyes drew to the other wizard sitting in the hallway. Bronson instinctually brought his hand up and ran it through his hair, hoping he did not look too awful, considering he had not slept since the day Draco and Hermione left.

"It seems those Malfoys are dead-set on turning you against me," said Quincy,

following his son's eyes. His own narrowed again. "Do you know him?"

It seemed that a lot of Death Eaters in this hallway liked to talk about Bronson as if he could not hear them. But he definitely could, and he did not miss the fact that Theo was claiming he had no memories. Still, he could not help but continue to stare at Theo, searching his eyes for some sort of sign that he was pretending, some sort of recognition that he knew Bronson, and he was important to him.

"No," Theo said after a short pause, taking his eyes off of him and heading slowly towards the next flight of stairs. "I think I met him once. Came out drinking with Draco and me or something."

Quincy kept his eyes on Bronson for a moment longer, trying to note some sort of reaction, but there was none. Bronson kept his cool and Quincy slowly began to walk away. He listened as the two continued to argue over Lucius. Then there was a loud clatter.

"OW! Th-fuck you do that for?"

"Carry your own shit, Theo!"

Bronson got the feeling Theo's father threw his bag at him, hopefully not hurting him more than he seemed to already be.

Their bickering continued and Bronson could not stop listening. Then the door to the building opened and banged shut, and they were gone.

Bronson continued to sit there, a long moment passing before it all finally hit him. His eyes began to tear as he realized Theo's fear had come true. He had forgotten everything, including the side he wanted to be fighting on. While he did not exactly seem trusting of his father, he was still with him, and probably going back to living with him. It was too dangerous for him there, but how the hell was Bronson supposed to get him out now? When he had no fucking idea who he was? There was nothing there. No light, no signal. Theo was just … gone.

Bronson could not remember a time when he had ever felt as helpless as he did now.

<center>XXX</center>

"Draco, I know you're awake."

Draco slowly began to open his eyes, turning so he was looking at Hermione's worried face. "Sorry, love. I *am* trying."

Hermione sighed and stroked his cheek. "Does it still hurt?"

Draco said nothing.

"Ernie should be back soon," said Ginny, lighting up her wand and looking at the time on her wristwatch. Hermione could tell she was getting worried. It should not have been taking him this long.

"Do you think we could get a Sleeping Draught?" asked Hermione. "For after Draco takes the potion? He really needs his rest."

"Granger, I'll be fine -"

"Don't argue," she snapped. "You promised me that when after you took the potion, you would lie in bed for however long I wanted, remember?"

Draco grunted. "Vaguely."

"Well, you did, and I plan to hold you to it." Hermione turned back towards Ginny. "A Sleeping Draught?"

"I'll … have to ask," she said, standing up. "I doubt Harry's sleeping, anyway." She walked towards the door, opened it and called Dean's name. "Check in on them every couple of minutes until I'm back," she ordered before leaving.

"I don't believe you're trying," said Hermione as soon as she was gone.

"Well, it's hard to want to sleep when I'm in the bloody lair of a large organization of people who want to kill me."

"No one is going to kill you, Draco," she said with a sigh. "I won't let them."

Draco nodded. He held out his arms and Hermione sunk into them, resting her head on his chest so that she could hear his heartbeat. Still beating. Still real.

"I'm not the only one who needs to rest, you know?" said Draco, entwining his hand with hers. "Do me a favor and just close your eyes until Weaselette comes back."

"Fine," said Hermione. "But *only* until she gets back. I refuse to sleep until Ernie arrives with your potion."

She closed her eyes and Draco began running his free hand soothingly through her hair. He kissed the top of her head before doing the same.

Back in Harry's room, he was sitting at his desk, trying to get some work done since he knew there was absolutely no chance he could fall asleep right now. Not while knowing Hermione was here. And Malfoy. He still had trouble believing that Malfoy was truly on their side, but, yet he had two people out of only a handful that he trusted with his life vouching for him. Not to mention Hermione. Whatever it was the two of them had, it seemed real. His stomach twisted as he suddenly felt like vomiting. Thank Merlin Ron was not -

His door burst open and Ron barged in. Harry went white. Well, shit.

"Ron!" he squeaked. "What are you doing here?"

"You-Know-Who's heightened security and I can't bloody get in. I need more supplies," he said, going over to Harry's cupboard and digging through it. He stuffed several things into his bag.

"Oh. Why has he done that?" asked Harry, trying his best to play dumb.

"I don't bloody know, but I bet it has something to do with that Malfoy piece of shit."

If only he knew how right he was.

"I don't believe him for one second, Harry. He's up to something, and I don't want her anywhere near whatever that something is."

Harry gulped. "Uhuh."

"Don't tell my dad I was here," said Ron before shutting the cupboard and heading for the door again.

As much as Harry did not want Ron to be here right now, he knew that he could not let him go back out there, risking his life to find someone who was not even there anymore.

Harry clenched his eyes shut and said, "Ron, wait!"

Ron turned back around and said, "What is it, mate?"

Harry opened his eyes again. "You can't go back out there."

"Why not?" asked Ron, turned bright red as he crossed his arms. "Don't you bloody go and start acting like my dad on me! We have both been waiting for this break to find her since -"

"Ron, I know. But …"

"But what?"

Harry looked off to the side and sighed. It was now or never. "You can't go back because you'd be wasting your time. She's not there anymore, Ron. She's not in London."

"How do you know -?"

"Because she's here," Harry said quickly.

Ron's eyes widened. "W-what?"

"She's here," Harry repeated. "Ginny spotted her in Hogsmeade and followed her to where she was hiding out in the mountains. We got her and brought her here. We waited, but there was no Polyjuice Potion, Ron. Not this time. It's her."

Ron's eyes began to tear as his arms slackened to his sides. "Where is she?" he asked. "I … I want to see her."

"And you can. But … I sort of need to talk to you about something first. She's not exactly … the same." He supposed that was as good an explanation as any.

"Well, of course she's not bloody the same! She's been a slave to Death Eaters! Now, *where is she*?" Ron said sternly.

"Just sit down for a moment, will you?"

"WHERE IS SHE?"

Harry's door burst open again. "Harry, Granger wants to know if she can have a Sleeping Draught for after the Healing Potion - Oh! Oh shit, Ron!" Ginny went white. "What are you doing back already?"

"Healing Potion?" repeated Ron. "She … she's hurt? What's wrong with her?"

"N-nothing," Ginny muttered. "Did you just get here? Maybe you should sit -"

"I'm not going to fucking sit down! Is she in the medical ward?"

Ginny stiffened. "N-no."

Ron sneered at her. "Liar," he spat before running out of the room.

"Ron!" shouted Harry.

Ginny took out her wand and ran towards him.

"Forget about me, Gin! I haven't told him about Malfoy yet! Just stop him!"

Ginny nodded frantically and ran after her brother.

"Ron, wait!" she shouted, trying to shoot a Stunning Spell at him, but he turned the corner too quickly. "Shit!" She ran after him and tried again, but he was moving too fast.

"Dean! Terry! Don't let him in!" she ordered as Ron reached them. But, before they could react, Ron had his wand out and stunned both of them. They fell in opposite directions, leaving the door clear. Ron opened it without a moment of hesitation.

A bright shaft of light spread across the room. And then there, in the closest bed, he saw her. Her eyes squinting as the light hit her face. Her bushy hair spread across someone else's chest, someone whose hand hers was entwined with. But Ron did not care. All he cared about was …

"Merlin, what's with the fucking light?" spat the person whose chest she was lying in.

Ron's heart slowed. His eyes slowly began to drift to the other face. And then his heart stopped completely.

"Draco, don't be rude," said Hermione, rubbing at her eyes. "Ginny, what did Harry say?"

Ron could feel his sister put his hand on his shoulder behind him, but he was quick to push her away. "It's not Ginny," he said in a hoarse voice.

Hermione froze while Draco's eyes immediately shot open. They locked with Ron's, even though he was just a blurry vision in the light. But Draco could still see him, and he seemed almost empty as he slowly looked back at Hermione.

Her eyes opened and she turned towards the light. Right now, he was just a silhouette, but she knew that figure anywhere. As her eyes slowly began to adjust, she sat up in the bed. She tried to remove her hand from Draco's but he held on tight.

Eyes finally focused, Hermione found Ron's blue eyes and locked onto them. Even

though she could tell he was in a bit of shock, possibly even angry, she did not care. All she cared about was that her friend, her best friend who she loved dearly, was standing right there, and he was finally reachable.

"Ron," she said with a gulp, her eyes tearing and her vision becoming blurry.

He stared back at her blankly for a few seconds, but the moment he finally focused and saw her was very clear.

"Her -" He gulped and caught himself. "It's … it's you?"

Hermione nodded. She yanked her hand out of Draco's and hurried off of the bed, running forward and throwing her arms around Ron's neck.

His arms began to shake as he slowly brought them up to hug her back. It felt the same, and he could not stop himself from bursting into tears as he hugged the girl he loved like no other.

But then his eyes drifted to the man sitting on the bed behind her, and his cold eyes were on him, watching him closely as he held Hermione tight.

Draco bit his cheek, trying to hold back his scowl, but there was little hope. This was what he had been dreading most of all. Fucking Weasley touching *his* girl. He would let them have their moment now, but if he dared try to win her back then there would be bloody hell to pay.

# Chapter 30: Yesterday

Hermione had been so happy to see Ron that she almost missed it when he began to tense in her arms. She knew he was looking over her shoulder at Draco, so she held on tighter, hoping to put off whatever inevitable explosion there was going to be for at least a moment longer.

But her troubles over Ron were quickly pushed aside when Ernie appeared behind him. Hermione gasped in relief and let Ron go.

"Ernie, did you get it?" she asked frantically, making a mental note to check that he was all right as soon as the potion was in Draco's system.

"Yes," he said, digging through his pockets. "Oh, Merlin, you all won't *believe* what I just went through. Morning, mate. You're back early." He looked at Ron and patted his shoulder before going back into his pockets. "First, a bunch of those bloody giant spider things chased me for getting too close to their nest. Cloak or not, those things can find you. Oh, here!" He took out a phial and handed it to Hermione. She snatched it quickly and ran over to the bed.

"Are we in the Forbidden Foreshh …?" asked Draco just as she stuffed the potion down his throat.

"Oh, right! Is that a secret?" asked Ernie, looking back at Ginny, who was grabbing at her brother's stiff arm.

She just shrugged, more concerned with Ron than what they should or should not be saying right now.

"Well, after I escaped them, the bloody centaurs passed me on their morning hunt. Nearly ran me right over! Had to climb halfway up a bloody tree to escape and *then* one of them almost spotted my feet poking out of the bottom of the cloak! After that I got to the mountains okay, but those bloody Snatchers were all over …"

"Are you feeling all right?" asked Hermione, losing the empty phial somewhere in the sheets as she took Draco's hand again.

"Fine, Granger. Instantaneous." He smirked.

Hermione smirked back softly. "It takes at least five minutes, Draco.

"… and then, when I finally bloody got there," continued Ernie, turning towards Ron and stepping in front of him slightly so that Draco was not in his direct view, "I realized that just taking one phial of the bloody potion was stupid, so I filled them all." He dug through his pockets some more and took out several more phials, giving them to Ginny. "I figured we could always use them."

Ginny opened one of the phials and took a whiff. "What is this potion called?" she asked, putting them all in her pocket.

"It's for internal bleeding," answered Hermione. "An Interentis Potion."

"But *then*, once I did that, I realized that leaving a bloody tent with incriminating evidence in it on a mountain, charmed or not, would be a pretty daft move, so I packed it all up in that bag you had lying out. One look inside of it and I knew it had that extension thing on it." Ernie pointed to the small bag tied to his hip. But *then*, while I was packing the bloody thing up, a duo of fucking Snatchers walked through the barrier and …"

Hermione's eyes began to tear as she continued to look at Draco. He reached up and wiped a falling one with his thumb. "Granger, what's wrong? The potion's in me now. There's no reason to -"

"You scared me!" Hermione shouted, giving his chest a slight shove, but not enough to push him away. "If something like this ever happens again, you need to listen to me! You need to rest! And you need to not lie to me and tell me you're feeling better than you are!"

Ron, who had pretty much been standing there in shock, suddenly puckered his eyebrows as he watched the way Hermione and Draco gazed at each other. He opened his mouth to say something, seeming quite angry, but, before he could, Ginny hit him with a Silencing Charm.

"I know, but I didn't want to stay in one place for too long," said Draco. "It was too dangerous."

"So those two bloody Snatchers chased me down the mountain before I could get

the damn invisibility cloak back on," continued Ernie, trying to distract everyone while Ron silently yelled at Ginny. And then Dean and Terry walked into the room, no longer stunned and looking bloody pissed. "I finally got it on, but the spell hiding my bloody footprints wore off …"

Forgetting about everyone around them, Draco cupped Hermione's face in his hands, leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry I scared you, love. Never again."

Dean and Terry each grabbed one of Ron's arms as he suddenly charged for Draco. It took both of them to drag him out of there, Ginny running after them and slamming the door behind her.

Draco and Hermione both looked over to see just Ernie standing there, still going on about his journey back here.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" shouted Ron once Ginny removed the Silencing Charm. Terry and Dean had dragged him all the way around the corner, each of them giving him a punch in the gut for stunning them before returning to guard duty.

Ginny looked at her brother and sighed. "Harry and I were trying to tell you but you just moved so damn fast."

Before she could say anything more, they both heard a grunting noise and turned. Harry had just come down their corridor, using the wall to brace himself as his legs went weak.

"Harry, what are you doing?" shouted Ginny, she and Ron both running over to him.

Harry knew the spell Ginny used on his legs, of course, but he was nowhere near as good at casting it as she was. He worked it well enough to get him from point A to point B, most normally his bed to his desk or vice versa. He would have had to cast the spell at least twenty times to have gotten this far.

"I wanted to make sure Ron didn't do something stupid."

"Oh, he tried," said Ginny, snapping her head towards her brother, "but Terry and Dean dragged him out before our … 'guests' noticed."

"He kissed her!"

"Her forehead," said Ginny, pressing a finger to her own.

"I don't care where it bloody was, he doesn't need to be touching her like that!"

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look and sighed. Instead of casting the spell on his legs, Ginny helped him to the floor and sat down beside him. She patted the spot next to her but Ron refused to sit.

"Look, Ron, we haven't had much of a chance to talk to her yet since Malfoy started coughing up blood and all shortly after their arrival," said Ginny, "but we did learn two things. One, he's defected. And two, they're together."

"Together," repeated Ron. "Like … like traveling together?"

Ginny sighed again.

"Ron, you know that's not what she means," Harry said bluntly.

"But … but how … how do we know he's really defected? Or she's not under some love potion or spell or -"

"I already gave her an antidote," explained Ginny. "No love potion. And Ernie confessed that Malfoy was the one who helped him escape last year. Then, when we still doubted him, Her -" She gulped. "Granger had us call Andromeda. *He's* the one who has been helping her and the others."

"But how do we know he hasn't bloody Imperiused them all? We never checked Ernie when he got back last year. He could have had someone on the inside this whole time! He could have -"

"He saved Neville, Ron!" said Ginny, turning red in the face. She honestly could not believe she was defending Draco Malfoy right now, but she had seen that kiss he gave Hermione too, and there was nothing but affection behind it. Besides, there was only so much one person could fake. Ron's conspiracy theories were completely farfetched, even for him.

Ron stared down at his sister, his face going white as his fists clenched. "He did?" he said quietly.

Ginny nodded. "Yes. He was Imperiused and Malfoy removed it. He then helped him fake his death and he is now hiding out with Andromeda and the others. He's safe."

Ron began breathing heavily through his nostrils as he looked to the floor.

"And you said yourself that he killed Alecto Carrow."

"Yeah, but I thought it was for bloody status or something! Not because of …" He trailed off and gulped. "… the *things* she was saying."

"Look," said Harry, "I think we should all just forget about Malfoy right now. Let's just let him heal and we'll deal with him when the time comes. For now, we need to focus on what's important. Her - Granger," he cringed, "is here, and she's okay."

Ron and Ginny nodded.

"She wants to give Malfoy a Sleeping Draught," said Ginny. "I think we should take this opportunity to talk to her without him. Find out the whole story."

"*Or,*" suggested Ron, "we could take this opportunity to throw him the hell out of here. Drop him back on the mountain or something."

Harry crinkled his brow while Ginny closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Not a good idea, Ron," she said. "I think it's been made pretty clear that they're a packaged deal. Besides, if he really is defected -"

"He's not!" snapped Ron. "It's all a bloody trick! I know it is!"

Draco sat very still on the bed while Hermione searched the bag Ernie had given her for a Sleeping Draught.

"Fucking Weasley …" he muttered.

"Are you listening to them, Draco?" asked Hermione, pulling a small bottle out.

"Obviously," he said. "Are you?"

She nodded and sighed.

"Are you two doing that weird ear thing again?" asked Ernie. "Because I'm probably supposed to prevent that."

"There's no need, I'm turning it off," said Hermione, waving her hand at her ear. Draco did the same.

The door opened a few moments later and Ginny and Harry walked in with Ron sulking behind them. He and Draco locked eyes once more, the wizards both staring daggers at each other.

Ginny saw that Hermione was holding her bag and her eyes began to widen.

Noticing this, Hermione sighed again and handed it back to Ernie. "You can relax, Ginny. I was just getting a Sleeping Draught." She waved the bottle before holding it out towards Draco, who moved away from it like it was the bloody plague.

"I'm not taking that fucking thing now."

"Draco, you promised me," she said sternly.

"Yeah, before I was around fucking people who plan to throw me out in my sleep."

Harry blushed and Ginny turned her head sharply towards her brother, but Ron just stood there, crossing his arms and standing by what he said.

"Sorry," said Ernie. "They're very sneaky with that bloody ear thing."

"You didn't take his wand?" asked Ron, his eyes narrowing.

"Of course we did," snapped Ginny, "but it doesn't do much good when he knows wandless magic."

"What?" said Ron, his eyes widening. "And you haven't bound him?"

"He kept undoing it!" she retorted. "We're not idiots, Ron! But, it seems, *someone* has been practicing their magic over the years."

Draco smirked proudly.

"Draco, just take the potion," said Hermione, holding it in front of his face. "All you're doing right now is rousing suspicion, and there's no need for that."

"But -"

"They're not going to throw you out. And, if for some reason, I'm wrong about that, then they're going to have to throw me out too. You were right about that packaged deal," she said, turning slightly towards Ginny. "If he leaves I leave."

Ron's mouth fell open slightly as he finally relaxed his stance. It was clear that he did not want Hermione to leave. She hoped that would be enough to get him to stop being suspicious of Draco, but she doubted it.

"All right, fine," said Draco. "Let's *assume* that if I take that potion I'll wake up in the exact same place, but why do they need to bloody talk to you without me? There's nothing different you're going to say to them without me there than if I was by your side."

"Yes, so then why should it matter?" she retorted. "Stop making excuses, Draco. Please?" She looked at him pleadingly and shook the bottle.

Draco let out a frustrated grunt before taking it from her and quickly chugging it down.

"If he's going to take a bloody nap then don't you think we should bind him?" said Ron, looking at Harry.

Hermione snapped her head and narrowed her eyes at him. "Why does he need to be bound when he's just going to be sleeping?"

"Oh, just bloody do it," said Draco, already swaying a bit as the potion began to hit him. He held out his wrists. "Ready for your lesson, Weaselette?"

Ginny nodded and walked over to him, trying her best to ignore her brother's curious but angry eyes.

"Okay," said Draco. "Loop your wand around my wrists three times counterclockwise."

Ginny did just that.

"Bigger loops, Ginny," explained Hermione, demonstrating with her hand.

Ginny stopped, corrected her form and started over.

"Then flick it on top, flick it on the bottom, circle one more time clockwise and say '*Stricta Obligo*'."

Ginny performed the movements and repeated, "*Stricta Obligo.*" Black ropes came out of her wand and wound around Draco's wrists like snakes before seeping slightly into his skin. Ginny grimaced and touched it. "Did the ropes just burrow into you?"

"Something like that," he said, blinking his drooping eyes several times. "It's not painful now but if I tried to remove it, and was somehow successful, I would have deep gashes. You'll need to practice it a bit more but, in my current state, it will hold just fine."

Ginny nodded.

Hermione frowned down at his wrists and slipped her hand between his. He clutched onto it.

"Lie down, Draco. You need to let the potion take effect."

Draco grunted before scooting down to a lying position. He looked at Ron and sneered.

"Uhh … Granger," said Harry, sighing a little as he said the name. He really hated it.

Hermione turned her head and waited expectantly.

"I know you probably want to rest now too, but -"

"No, it's fine," she said, glancing back down at Draco. "I'll talk to you now."

"Okay," said Harry. "Then we should probably head to my room before everyone wakes up and starts walking around."

Hermione nodded and began to stand, but Draco quickly yanked her back.

"Hold up. Why can't you just fucking talk in here? It's not like I can bloody hear anything while I'm sleeping."

"My dad's bound to check on us again soon," said Ginny. "If we're still over here he is going to get suspicious."

"But I thought you weren't going to tell anyone about -?"

"We'll keep her hidden," said Harry, glancing at Hermione.

"Yeah, my dad's not exactly known for his discreteness. We won't let him see her."

"Why are we explaining ourselves to him?" snapped Ron. "Forget him and let's just bloody go."

He stormed out of the room. Hermione looked sadly after him. She moved to follow but Draco pulled her back again. He had an incredibly strong grip for a sick, bound person on a Sleeping Draught.

"Draco, let me go, please."

"No," he said, glaring at the place Ron had just been. "I don't want you to go."

"But you won't even realize -"

"Yes, I will."

Hermione sighed before glancing at Harry and Ginny. "Could we have a moment, please?"

They looked skeptically at each other. "But we really need to hurry," said Ginny.

"It will only take a second," said Hermione. "Please?"

They both nodded before exiting the room. Harry seemed a little wobbly again and Ginny already had her wand at the ready. Once they were gone, Hermione noticed Ernie was still standing in the corner. He looked rather tired and seemed to be zoning out. It took him a moment to realize he was supposed to leave too.

"Oh, right! Sorry," he said before exiting and shutting the door behind him.

"Draco, what's the problem?" asked Hermione as soon as she and Draco were alone.

"I don't like that fucking prick," said Draco, sneering towards the door. "And I *don't* want you going off with him."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It's not like we're going to be alone."

"But -"

Hermione put a finger to his lips to shush him. "Draco, you're being ridiculous. I told you a long time ago that I could never go back to Ron. Too much has changed. You know that."

"Yes, but …" His eyes began to close but he quickly forced them back open. "Just … let me hear it again."

Hermione smiled. She leaned down and kissed him tenderly. When she pulled away, she looked into his eyes, stroked his cheek and said, "I'm yours, Draco, and I love you. Nothing is ever going to change that."

"And I'm your boyfriend? You've never actually said it before but I am, right?"

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, well, I thought when we confirmed we were in a relationship at Christmas that the title was a given."

Draco frowned.

"Yes, Draco, you're my boyfriend," she said before kissing him again. But really the word did not seem strong enough for how she felt. "Since when have you been so

insecure?"

"Since we entered the lair housing the wizard you never had closure with."

Hermione sighed and brushed a strand of hair out of his eyes. "That may take some time. But I promise that my feelings for you will not change. Please, just go to sleep. And, when you wake up, I will be right here beside you."

Draco nodded and closed his eyes. "One more kiss before you go."

Hermione leaned down and pressed her lips to his, feeling a great anxiety as she realized she had to leave him now. "Get better, my love," she whispered before kissing his cheek and standing up. By the time she got to the door, the Sleeping Draught had taken effect and he was fast asleep. She opened it and stepped out. Only Ginny and Ernie were in the corridor.

"I sent Terry and Dean to bed, but Ernie has agreed to stay with Draco while we're gone," explained Ginny. "We don't have a specific need for the medical ward right now so it should be safe in there."

Ernie chuckled. "*Should be*. Real encouraging, Ginny." He handed her Hermione's bag, went into the room and shut the door.

Ginny took out her wand and put several Locking Charms in place. "This way," she said, leading Hermione down the corridor.

"Where are Harry and Ron?" Hermione asked.

"They went to make an appearance in the breakfast hall to satisfy my dad. And pick us up some food."

They turned several corners, passing an array of doors as they headed down corridors, both long and short.

"How on earth have you all been able to hide a place so big?" asked Hermione, her eyes scanning the halls in wonder.

"It's just a small tent on the outside, which we camouflaged to blend in with the forest. We have worked on expanding it for years. Every day, the resistance is growing and we work hard to accommodate."

"I thought you moved often."

"No," said Ginny. "We have many bases but this has been our main one since the

beginning. There are more shields around this place than Hogwarts. Even if guided by a resistance member by the hand, You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters could never get inside. Not without our approval."

They finally came to a lone wooden door in a long corridor. Ginny waved her wand and opened it. She let Hermione walk in first, then shut and locked the door behind them.

Hermione looked around the large room, seeing pieces of Harry in every corner. The messy scribble written on the parchment on the desk, the chocolate frog wrappers by his bed, the books on Quidditch flooding the shelves, and the photo of him, Hermione and Ron in the first year on his nightstand.

Hermione walked over to it. Next to that was a photo of his parents in Godric's Hollow and, beside that, was one of him and Ginny in the exact same place. Hermione smiled and picked it up.

"When did the two of you get back together?" she asked.

"About a year after the Battle of Hogwarts," answered Ginny. "Pretty much had to force him, but I eventually got him to cave." She smiled proudly.

Hermione put the photo down and turned back around. They both stood there awkwardly for a moment, unsure of what they were supposed to say.

"Is the book you got that potion out of in here?" asked Ginny, holding up Hermione's bag. "Because I wouldn't mind reading a bit about it before I start giving it out to people."

"It was in the tent," answered Hermione, "but maybe Ernie took it out."

He hadn't. When Harry and Ron got back to the room, Ginny was holding the tent up while Hermione moved around inside of it, trying to locate her book after everything had been shuffled around.

"Got it!" she shouted, looking a bit ruffled as she emerged, holding it high for everyone to see and blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes. She handed the book to Ginny. "Page six-hundred and seventy-two."

Ginny used her wand to pack the tent back up before going over to Harry's bed and getting comfortable with the book in her lap. Getting a little wobbly, Harry, who was holding pastries, hurried over and joined her but Ron stayed in place, glancing at Hermione while avoiding looking at her directly. He nervously held out a glass he was holding.

Hermione took it and smiled. "Pumpkin juice. All these years and you still remembered it's my favorite."

Ron nodded.

Hermione took a sip while everyone watched, feeling slightly uncomfortable. She did not understand what they were looking at, considering it was probably a fairly boring show. "As good as I remember," she said, just to give them something.

"What? Malfoy didn't have pumpkin juice in his flat?" said Ron with a sneer.

Hermione frowned. "I see Harry told you where I've been since my escape." She went over and sat in one of the chairs by Harry's desk. "No, no pumpkin juice. Just coffee, tea and firewhiskey. Lots and lots of firewhiskey."

"He an alcoholic or something?" More sneering.

Hermione shrugged. "He has a stressful career."

Ron went white. "That's not funny."

She sighed and put her glass down. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"Perhaps we could start with where the hell you got all of these ingredients," said Ginny, crinkling her brow as she stared down at the book. "Most of these aren't even sold in the Black Market. Like Phoenix tears?"

Hermione shrugged. "We were in the mountains, remember? I went out looking for Fawkes and he was more than happy to assist."

"And the others?" asked Ginny.

Hermione bit her cheek and looked in the opposite direction. "We might have gone into Hogwarts for those," she said quietly.

"What?" Ginny asked.

Hermione cleared her throat and repeated, "Hogwarts," but much louder this time.

"Hogwarts!" Ron, Harry and Ginny all yelled.

"Are you insane?" shouted Ginny.

"Patronuses set off alarms in there!" exclaimed Harry. "How did you get past the Dementors?"

"Draco knows a trick with … with his mark," said Hermione, pointing at her arm. "It makes them head in the opposite direction."

"But that's still so dangerous!" said Ginny. "You shouldn't be taking risks like -"

"Look, Draco was sick, and I did what I had to do so he could get better," Hermione said sternly. "I would do the same for any of you."

They all shut their mouths pretty quickly after that.

There were several moments of awkward silence where no one looked at each other. Then Ron mumbled something Hermione could not make out.

"What?" she asked.

"Where were you?" he repeated louder, looking up and catching her eyes with his. "You promised me. I waited in the forest just outside of the gates for a week before my family finally dragged me away." His eyes were tearing and Hermione had to turn away to stop herself from doing the same. "Where *were* you?"

"You know where I was, Ron," she said, closing her eyes and taking several deep breaths.

"But … but how?"

She opened her eyes again and looked back at him. "I'm going to tell you, but you have to remember not to point blame where it does not belong."

"That means it has to do with *him*." Ron sneered and turned away.

"Yes, it does," said Hermione. "I don't think I'd gone twenty feet from you when he and I collided."

"Collided?" repeated Ginny, closing the book and leaning in to listen.

"Yes, collided," said Hermione, smacking her hands together for effect. "Ran right into each other, knocked each other over. We were attacked by Thicknesse only a moment later. I stunned him, but then the Malfoys appeared. They were being chased by Bellatrix and she killed Narcissa without a moment's hesitation. Then she went for me, ordering Lucius to capture me and use me as a bargaining tool for his and Draco's lives. So he did."

"And what was Malfoy doing during all of this?" asked Harry, trying hard to hold in his own pain. And guilt.

"Grieving over his dead mother's body," answered Hermione. She paused and took a deep breath. "You need to understand, I was angry at Draco for a long time for not doing anything that day, but the reality is that, if he had tried to kill his aunt, he would have lost and he would have died. But he has done so much for me to make up for it."

"Are you seriously telling us that Draco Malfoy *actually* feels guilty about something?" asked Ron, raising his eyebrows.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "He feels guilty about a lot of things. But, in this case, he feels guilty that we ran into each other. He had been hiding and he was trying to flee when he heard You-Know-Who had returned with his victory party. If he had stayed put, I might have been able to keep up with Hagrid and his mother might have escaped her sister. But he didn't, and nothing can change that now."

Everyone was silent. Ron glared angrily at the floor, unable to bring himself to look at her again. Hermione waited for him to say something but, when it became clear that he was not, she sighed and looked at her barely touched glass of pumpkin juice. She picked it up and took a sip, hoping the distraction would keep her from crying. For years she had waited for this moment, to be reunited with her friends, but it was not going well at all. She had suspected it would not, but she had still hoped for the best. Well, so much for that. Optimism really only got you so far.

After putting the glass back down, Hermione looked at each of her friends' sullen faces. "Look, I am not going to sit here and tell you all that Draco has made a complete one-eighty, because he hasn't. He's still an arse, to most people, anyway." All but her, really. "He's still a chauvinist and an avid believer in pureblood superiority, he both drinks and smokes far too often, his language is anything but appropriate," Hermione sighed deeply, "but he's trying to be better. For years, he has been seeking redemption, and I don't think it's fair for all of you to dismiss him so easily."

"I've been in battle with him before," said Ron. "He's taken countless lives."

"Yes, I know," she said. "I know the name of every life he has taken because he keeps track of it. He takes as few lives as he can but it is impossible to save everyone. He's done a lot of good, Ron."

"That doesn't change the fact that he's done a lot of bad."

And that was it. The last straw. Hermione shot to her feet and marched forward. "And I suppose you're so innocent? In all of these years, there hasn't been one life,

*one life* that you regret taking?"

"No," Ron said calmly, "because I've only killed the guilty."

Hermione's face tensed. She slowly shook her head. "You are so naïve. You assume that just because someone is a Death Eater they are evil, but the majority of them are forced into it by their families. They don't want to kill. Innocent Death Eaters have died because you're all so quick to judge them. But, the truth is, they are just the same as you, only their circumstances have forced them to fight on a different side. There are shades of gray in every war, Ron. You would be wise to remember that."

Hermione's words suddenly made her think of Theo. She really hoped he was all right. Tonight she was supposed to talk to Bronson, but she had a pretty good feeling that they had no intention of giving her bag back. Her association with Draco made her pretty much a prisoner here. It seemed she was destined to be one time and time again, no matter which side she was with.

"So where were the shades of gray on New Year's when he beheaded that girl?"

Boiling over with anger, Hermione could not stop herself from swinging her hand back and smacking Ron hard across the face. "Don't mock what you don't understand!" she shouted with tears in her eyes. "You've never been forced to watch the other side, so you don't know how to tell the difference between those who enjoy killing, and those who try to make it as quick as possible so their victims don't feel pain! That girl was already dead and you know it!"

Ron's eyes were wide in shock as he brought his hand up to touch his wounded cheek.

"And speaking of New Year's, what the hell were you doing there, Ron?" she asked, clenching her fists. "Did you *really* think abducting Draco was going to help you find me?"

"We … we weren't going to keep him," said Ron, looking more wounded by her angry eyes than that slap. "I just wanted more information on you. I … I didn't know what to believe."

Hermione sniffled and wiped at her eyes. "Before Draco left for Godric's Hollow, he asked me if I wanted him to tell any of you about me if opportunity presented itself, and I said yes. I told him to let you know that I would be with you shortly. So he sought you out. For *me.* And because of that one error in judgment, because I *thought* you could handle just knowing I was safe and would find you soon, Draco

almost died. He almost died because you were stupid enough to try and kidnap him in front of bloody You-Know-Who! He used the Cruciatus Curse on him thirty-nine times, Ron!"

All color drained from Ron's face. "But that's impossible. He would be dead if -"

"So you're calling him a liar now?"

"No, I -"

"Draco's alive for two reasons. One is that this was not the first time You-Know-Who tortured him excessively. As sad as it is, he's used to it. And two is his strong will to live. He made an important promise to me to get me back to you and Harry, and an even more important promise to his mother to avenge her. He refuses to die until both are fulfilled."

"Looks like he's halfway there."

Hermione's jaw dropped. Her head sank and her shoulders began to bob as the tears she had been holding back fell from her eyes.

Ron immediately regretted it all. "No, wait. Please don't cry," he pleaded, reaching out and putting his hands on the sides of her arms. "I'm sorry. I -"

Hermione moved away from his touch. "I want to go back now. I … I want to see Draco."

"What?" asked Ron, his face dropping. "Why?"

"I want to make sure he's all right," she cried.

Ginny stood up and hurried over to her. "But he's asleep," she said, trying to comfort Hermione in a similar fashion as her brother, only to have her pull away from her too. She sighed. "He won't be awake for hours. Please stay. We don't have to talk about this anymore. We can talk about something else. *Anything* else."

"I was a slave for four years, four months and fourteen days. I wandered the streets for three days until Draco found me and took me in. *He* is all I have to talk about."

Ginny's eyes began to tear. She took a step closer to her. "But … maybe we could tell you about our next mission and you could help us come up with a clever plan to -"

Hermione shook her head. "My mind isn't what it used to be, Ginny. It's …" She gulped. "It's endured too much damage."

Harry's jaw dropped, Ron quickly turned away and attempted to slyly wipe at his eyes, and Ginny could not stop herself from whimpering.

"I'm not … I'm not an idiot by any means but my ideas are not as well thought out as they used to be. Draco got me a book to help exercise my mind but - and there I go talking about him again!" Hermione scoffed as she wiped at her eyes. "I just …" Her bottom lip quivered. "I have nothing to contribute anymore."

"That's not true!" defended Ginny. "That's -"

"Please just take me back," Hermione said weakly.

"But Harry and Ron brought pastries and -"

"I'm not hungry. Just really, really tired. So if there is nothing else specific you would like to ask me -"

"How did you escape?" asked Harry, chiming in for the first time. Hermione did not understand why he was being so quiet around her. While Ron may have spoken naively, at least he spoke.

"During the slave trade, a woman in the carriage I was riding in gave me a knife. I used it to slit Rodolphus Lestrange's throat open and then I ran for my life."

"But … Rodolphus Lestrange is still alive," said Ron, finally turning back around. "I saw him in Godric's Hollow and he tried to grab you in -"

"Yes, well, apparently I'm really bad at killing someone without a wand. He survived somehow and he isn't exactly pleased with me."

Hermione wanted to tell them more about him but, when she opened her mouth to do it, the words would not come out. This was not the time. She was not ready to tell them about Rodolphus and his sick obsession with her, along with everything else she had gone through during those four years, four months and fourteen days. And, what more, they were not ready to hear it. She knew they weren't. Ginny was the only one who did not seem to be in complete denial. Ron was still stuck on the Death Eater she had arrived with and Harry seemed afraid to talk to her completely.

"Anything else?" she asked, wiping at her eyes some more.

Harry, Ginny and Ron all looked around at each other, but no one had anything.

"All right then," said Hermione. "Would you mind if I grabbed some extra Sleeping Draughts and some night clothes out of my bag?"

Ginny shook her head and Hermione went over to it, digging through until she found two Sleeping Draughts, pajamas for her, pajamas for Draco, and her two-way mirror which she hid inside of his sleep shirt.

"Granger …" said Ginny, the only one who seemed comfortable enough calling her that. "I just … I feel you should know that it is not our decision whether or not Malfoy can stay here."

"Then whose is it?" Hermione asked, turning towards her.

"Kingsley and Professor McGonagall are in charge," said Harry, "but neither is here right now."

Hermione nodded. "I suppose we will cross that bridge when we come to it. Can I go now?"

"Yes, I'll take you," said Ginny, heading for the door. She opened it and poked her head out. The coast was clear.

Hermione followed after her but, before she could exit the room, Ron grabbed her arm and said, "Wait." He pulled her into him and held on tight. "I'm sorry, all right? I'm sorry I let you go. I -"

"Ron, I know," said Hermione, lifting her arms and wrapping them tightly around his waist. "But you had to go and help your family. You did the right thing."

"But -"

"Please, don't blame yourself," she said, nuzzling her face into his chest. "Sometimes things happen that are out of our control. But I know you never gave up on me. That's all that matters."

Ron nodded into her shoulder before reluctantly letting her go. Hermione turned quickly and followed Ginny out.

As soon as they were gone, Ron whipped his head towards Harry and narrowed his eyes. "Why aren't you saying anything to her?"

"I … don't want to say the wrong thing," said Harry, pinching at his legs but feeling

nothing. "I don't want Malfoy here either, you know? It's not that I don't think he's defected but -"

"You *actually* think -?"

"Yes, Ron, I do," Harry said sternly. "I know you saw the way he looks at her. You can't fake that amount of affection. But people aren't going to take his being here very well. That's my concern and that's why I think Kingsley and McGonagall might not let him stay."

Ron went white. He gulped. "But Malfoy has to stay." Those were definitely words he never thought would be coming out of his mouth. But Hermione had made herself clear. If he goes then she does too, and there was no way in hell Ron was losing her again.

Harry chuckled. "So you finally get it then?"

Ron looked away and slowly nodded.

"Neither of us wants to lose her again, Ron. That's why we have to cooperate with this. She seems to have developed a …" Harry pursed his lips and crinkled his brow. "A …"

"Dependence?"

Harry frowned. "Exactly."

Ron breathed heavily through his nose. "Well, then we're just going to have to break that, aren't we?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Harry. "I know you were kind of holding out for her and all but -"

"That's *not* what this is about. There's no way I'm letting *our* friend end up with a bloody Death Eater!"

Harry sighed. He knew that was a lie, but he was just too exhausted to argue with him on it now. Ron had always figured that when Hermione got back they would be together again. But, Malfoy or not, Harry had a pretty good feeling that this was never going to happen. She was not the same girl they had lost four and a half years ago, despite those few glimpses he might have seen of her, and, what more, Ron was not the same either. Heck, even *he* was not the same. War changed all of them, and there were probably going to be greater obstacles than Draco Malfoy to get the three of them back to the friendship they once had.

Back in the medical ward, Ginny tried to stay a bit, but Hermione dismissed her pretty quickly after convincing her to remove Draco's binds so she could change him. She made Ernie turn around and dressed an unconscious Draco in some of his silky pajamas, figuring he would be angry if she put him in the flannel ones in public. This was a much more difficult task without a wand, but she got it done.

After changing her own clothes and hiding the two-way mirror under the mattress, she let Ernie turn back around and climbed into the bed next to Draco. It was very small, but she wrapped her arms around him and held on tight so she would not roll off the edge.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to sleep but it was next to impossible with all of the thoughts running through her head. Why was Ron so hotheaded? Why did Harry seem to not want to talk to her? How come he did not have a wheelchair? It seemed much more practical than that spell. And, most importantly, what was she going to do if they did not let Draco stay? Of course, she would never leave him, but she did not want to lose her friends again either. Not when she had just found them. Her entire motivation for escaping was finding Ron and Harry again and rebuilding her old life. Merlin, she missed the way things used to be between them.

Her head beginning to ache from all of this thinking. Hermione reached her hand towards the small table beside the bed and grabbed one of the Sleeping Draughts off of it. She chugged it down and kissed Draco's cheek before closing her eyes again. This time, sleep came much easier.

Draco opened his eyes at the faint sound of a door clicking. He had trained himself years ago to always be listening when under the influence of a Sleeping Draught, and they never worked on him for as long as they should have. He knew Hermione was already back, that she had hidden something under the mattress, and that his clothes were most definitely different. But he did not know who would be coming in now.

Ernie stood from the chair he was sitting in and whispered with the new person standing in the doorway. Draco knew that stance anywhere. Fucking Weasley. What did *he* want?

And then Ernie left. The door shut behind him and Ron stayed behind. Shit.

Draco closed his eyes again. He heard Ron approach the bed and stop at the foot

of it, obviously looking at one of them. Maybe both.

Well, there was no way Draco was going to be able to fake sleep with a bloody audience, so he might as well say something. "Come to finish the job, Weasley?" He opened his eyes again and, even in the dark, saw Ron's look of surprise.

"Yeah, I heard about that. Such a pity."

Draco took by his sneer that the pity was not that he had been tortured. "What are you doing in here?"

"Giving Ernie a break. Of course, I wouldn't have agreed to it if I knew you were bloody awake. That Sleeping Draught should still be working for another two hours."

Draco shrugged. "Which is exactly what the enemy would think if they drugged me with one. I've trained myself to be prepared for many scenarios over the years. Unfortunately, it seems to have worked against me in this case. I would much rather be sleeping than staring at your ugly face."

"Fuck you, Malfoy."

"Actually, I believe that's Granger's job."

Ron turned bright red with anger. He raised his fist and lunged forward, but then Hermione began to stir.

"Uh, uh, uh," said Draco, wagging his finger at him. "She so rarely ever sleeps peacefully anymore. You might want to let her have this."

Ron lowered his fist but kept it clenched. "You fucking bastard."

Draco smirked. "You better start coming up with better names for me, because I don't think Granger would care for your language."

"If she puts up with yours, then I can't imagine she'll care very much."

Draco shrugged.

A long moment of silence passed.

"You don't deserve her," Ron finally said.

Draco looked down at Hermione curled into his side. "That fact hasn't escaped me,

Weasel. But, for as long as she'll have me, I'm hers." He moved his eyes back to Ron. "Although, I'm sure you're already coming up with some elaborate yet idiotic plan to get me out of the picture."

Ron said nothing.

"When the little Creevey prick found out about us, he tried to make Granger feel guilty by saying you waited for her. Any truth to that?"

Ron's silence continued.

"Well, if it is, I suggest you let go of your little childhood fantasies and move on, because I won't be giving her up quite as easily as you would like."

Hermione stirred some more. Draco wrapped an arm underneath her and pulled her closer.

"I want to talk to her," said Ron.

"What, didn't go well before?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow. He looked down and noticed something in Hermione's hand. An empty bottle. "It looks like you might be waiting a while." He lifted her hand so Ron could see. "And I won't have you waking her up early. She needs this."

Ron grunted and went over to Ernie's chair. He slumped into it. "I fucking hate you, Malfoy."

"The feeling's mutual," said Draco with a sneer. He sank back into his bed and repositioned Hermione so she would be comfortable. "And the next time I tell you she's fucking fine, do us all a bloody favor and listen." He closed his eyes and tried hard to drift back to sleep.

Ron tried to stay awake in his chair, but he had not slept at all the night before either and, before long, his eyes began to flutter shut. But they had barely closed all the way when he was jerked awake again by an earth-shattering scream.

Ron jumped up from his chair and pulled his wand out in one fluid motion. Once his eyes focused, he saw that Hermione was thrashing around in the bed, her eyes still closed while Draco tried to hold her still.

"Granger! Granger, wake up!"

Her eyes shot open but her screams continued.

"Granger, look at me! It's me! It's Draco!"

Hermione's screams stopped but her breathing remained erratic. "D-Draco?"

He cupped her face and nodded.

While continuing to stare into his eyes, Hermione began to cry. Draco pulled her towards him. She wrapped her arms tightly around his waist and sobbed loudly into his chest. "I'm sorry," she cried. "I -"

"Shh," said Draco, stroking his hands through her hair and kissing the top of her head. "Granger, it's fine."

"But I was getting better! I -"

"Don't worry about it. Just breathe. It was only a dream, remember? Just breathe."

Suddenly, the door burst open and Ernie ran inside. "Ron, what's going on? I heard bloody screams all the way down the hall and - Ron?"

Ron walked right past him and slammed the door behind him. Once he was in the hallway, he pressed his back against the wall and used it to sink to the floor. He burst into tears as reality suddenly struck him. She had seemed almost normal before, but no one could have nightmares like that without having gone through something horrible.

For years, Ron had told himself that the Death Eaters would not want her. Maybe to torture every now and then when they remembered her existence in their basements, but he had convinced himself that it was not that horrible for her. That she was all right and, when she came back, everything would be the same. *She* would be the same.

But it wasn't. *She* wasn't. And he couldn't even hate Draco Malfoy for holding her when she so clearly needed it. But he could hate him for other reasons. There were many, many other reasons why he could never let Hermione, *his* Hermione, end up with the likes of him. A Death Eater. Someone who associated with the people who had given her nightmares like that. Hermione deserved better, and he would be more than happy to remind her of that.

# Chapter 31: Not Guilty

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After Hermione's nightmare, Draco split the other Sleeping Draught with her to get her back to sleep. He did not actually want it, but it was the only way she would agree to take any.

The potion only worked on Draco for about another hour or so, then he was woken up by the door opening again. Ginny walked in and sent Ernie on his way, taking over as guard.

"Do you never sleep, Weaselette?" asked Draco once she took her seat.

Ginny jumped in surprise. "I could ask you the same question."

Draco waited.

"I don't sleep well," she answered.

"Neither do I," he replied. Then he took a moment to really look her over. Her words must have been true because dark circles surrounded her eyes, which were only exacerbated by her ashen skin. "Are you not feeling well?"

"I'm fine," she said. "Just tired."

Draco was not sure if he believed that, but Ginny Weasley was hardly his concern,

so he let it go. For now. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Half past one," she answered. "If you're hungry, I brought some lunch for you." Ginny lifted a small basket that had been set by her feet.

"Not right now." Hermione stirred against him and he looked down at her. "Did your talk with her earlier not go well?"

Ginny blushed and glanced down at the floor. "Not exactly. I don't think any of us really knew what to expect, and we didn't handle it the best."

Draco knew what *that* meant. "Just treat her like a normal fucking person, Weaselette. It's not going to do her any good if you baby her."

Ginny nodded, her eyes glossy as she glanced back at Hermione. "How long has … has this been going on between the two of you?" she suddenly asked. "It wasn't right away, was -?"

"Of course not," said Draco with a sneer. "Believe what you want, but I had no intention of anything like this ever happening. Once I got her into my flat, all I wanted to do was get her the fuck out again, because I knew the longer she stayed with me, the more at risk we both were of getting caught."

Ginny leaned forward. "And then what happened?"

Draco looked down at Hermione again and brushed some loose hair out of her eyes. "Then, one day, I suddenly realized I didn't want her to go. And, now, here we are."

"She says you're still a chauvinist."

Draco laughed. "Did she now?"

Ginny nodded.

"Well, I can see you're seeking some sort of explanation, so I'll tell you what I told her. Purebloods *are* superior. We've had magic in our families for ages and have more advantages, but I do not believe in the Dark Lord's treatment of Muggle-borns, nor do I believe they should be forbidden from using magic. And, of course, there are always the few exceptions to the rule." He stroked Hermione's cheek. "Will that suffice?"

"I suppose it'll have to," she said, leaning back in her chair. She paused and studied Hermione's serene face. "What does she have nightmares about?"

Draco shrugged. "She once told me she dreams about the Battle of Hogwarts, but I'm sure it was only a half-truth."

Ginny suddenly got very quiet and looked to the floor. Draco wished there was at least a clock ticking or something because the silence was a bit unnerving. He tried hard to focus on the sound of Hermione's breathing to make it more bearable. Still even. Still sleeping.

Eventually, Ginny looked up at him with glossy eyes. "I've …" She gulped. "I've met girls before who we rescued from slavery. I helped take care of them and they would tell me the horror stories of what they went through. Was … was it the same for her?"

Draco gazed back at her and crinkled his brow. "Why are you asking me? Don't you think you should be asking her -?"

"I can't," Ginny said quickly. "I just … please?"

Draco grunted and looked down at Hermione again. He sighed. "Of course she did."

The tears in Ginny's eyes immediately spilled over.

"If you really want the truth then you should know it was probably worse for her. She was the only slave Death Eaters were instructed to keep alive, so, I'm sure, out of fear of going too far and suffering the Dark Lord's wrath, most also made a point to keep her conscious."

Ginny whimpered and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

"You're going to have to get over that pretty quickly," said Draco, referring to her crying. He did not mean to sound cold, but Hermione did not need this. "She does not want to be pitied, or babied. She went through it, she survived, and she's stronger because of it. And I think she would like it if at least one of her friends would talk to her about it. She talks to me about it less now that we're together, but she never really went into depth over what happened to her."

Ginny nodded but her tears would not stop falling. "Ern … Ernie's girlfriend is going to come by later. We figured since she kept his secret about you that she can be trusted. She's a better Mediwitch than I am, more like a Healer, and she wants to look her over. Especially her … her head." She pointed at her own.

"She told you about that?"

Ginny nodded again.

Draco smirked. "I'm sure she was exaggerating. Her mind's already improved drastically since I found her. As long as she keeps challenging herself, she'll get back to where she was."

"You never …" Ginny looked skeptically at Draco, who cocked an eyebrow. She took a deep breath. "You never *owned* her, did you, Malfoy?" she asked, keeping his gaze the entire time.

Draco's face distorted in disgust. "Fuck no! I would never own a slave! Least of all her!" he shouted. "And frankly, Weaselette, I'm a little offended you would even ask. Forget who you think I am, but do you honestly believe Granger would have anything to do with me if I had?"

"No," she answered. "I'm just trying to understand this … *relationship* the two of you have formed. No further offense intended, but the old Granger wanted nothing to do with you."

"And the old Draco felt the same way about her, but things fucking change."

"I suppose that's true," she said, reaching into her basket and taking out an apple. She bit hard into it and chomped away.

"Toss me one of those bloody things," said Draco, holding up his hand.

Ginny grabbed another and threw it at him.

Draco took a big bite. "If this is about your fucking brother -"

"It's not," she said, taking another bite and trying to chew louder than him. "I just don't know about you. The Draco Malfoy I knew -"

"The Draco Malfoy you knew *of*. You never knew me." The competition was on. Draco took a bite twice as big as hers and chomped with his mouth half-open, since he did not want to be barbaric by opening it completely. "But, either way, that boy does not exist anymore. Seeing your mother murdered before your very eyes changes you. I'm sure you can relate."

Ginny stared at him unblinking for a moment before lowering her apple and sighing.

"At least you haven't been forced to fight by the side of your mother's murderer for the past four and a half years. Because, let me tell you, it's bloody fucking awful.

Especially when all you can think about when she's in the fucking room is how good it would feel to strangle the life out of her with your bare hands."

Mouth agape, Ginny finally blinked and said, "Bellatrix is mine."

"I beg to differ," said Draco, taking a normal-sized bite out of his apple. "I've waited too fucking long to see her die by anyone's hand but my own."

"Draco, stop being difficult and maybe consider teamwork for once in your life," Hermione muttered into his side.

"*Me* being difficult? What about *her*?" He looked at Ginny with accusatory eyes.

"She gets a free pass since I haven't seen her in a while," said Hermione with a yawn.

Ginny smirked at him.

"But, really, who cares who kills Bellatrix as long as she's gone? Plenty of people have just as much right as the two of you. If Ginny gets the opportunity before you then she better take it and vice versa."

Draco and Ginny both grunted.

"There will be none of that," said Hermione, scooting up a bit in the bed. "You both know I'm right. The sooner she's dead, the better."

They both grunted again.

"Does that mean you're in agreement?"

"Yes, *Mother*," they both said scornfully.

"I'm going to choose to ignore the irony behind that," said Hermione.

A short while later, Ron came into the room. He still seemed to want to talk to Hermione, but whenever he started to mention perhaps they should go somewhere alone, he was quickly interrupted by Draco, who was also making a very clear point to always be touching her in some way. She, of course, was not blind to the way he was claiming her, but it did not seem like the time or place to call him out on it. While she normally did not mind his arm being around her waist and stroking her side, the intimacy of it all was sort of wasted when the only reason he was doing it was to get a rise out of Ron.

"Where's Harry?" she asked while slightly wiggling out of Draco's grasp.

"He's going to have a harder time sneaking over here than me or Ron," answered Ginny. "We can lie and say we're going out to find food or herbs or something, but it doesn't exactly work when he tries."

Hermione nodded. "But he'll come by tonight?"

Ginny smiled. "Yes, he plans to. You know he'd be here now if he could."

She nodded again. Then she pursed her lips like she was going to say something but paused. "How come Harry doesn't have a wheelchair?" she finally asked.

"He does," answered Ron. "We made one for him years ago, but he can't use it anymore."

"Why not?"

"Because of all of the people we have to accommodate here," said Ginny. "The corridors used to be wider, but magic only goes so far and we had to narrow them to fit in more rooms. The chair doesn't fit anymore. We narrowed it as much as we could but it gets stuck, even with magic moving it."

"Hmm …" Hermione bit her lip and stared down at her hands, giving off that 'deep in thought' look Draco loved so much.

It had not escaped Hermione that it would be pretty hard for Harry to defeat Voldemort in his current condition. The spell they had for his legs only lasted so long and it would be both dangerous and ridiculous for him to use the wheelchair out in the open or have someone carry him on their back.

"So what exactly is the deal with his legs?" asked Draco, picking at a piece of bread Ginny had given him from her basket. "Was it caused by magic or is it a spinal cord thing?" "Why does it matter?" asked Ginny.

"Well …" Draco gulped down his bite. "If it was caused by magic then there is a better chance it is curable by magic. As far as I know, there are no spells powerful enough to heal a spinal cord injury, but if it's something else then at least there's a glimmer of fucking hope."

"Since when do *you* care about Harry?" asked Ron, his lip curling into a sneer.

"Well, *Weasley,* as much as Granger and I love being hunted down by the evilest wizard of all time, it may come as a shock for you to know that we would not mind

terribly if the war ended here pretty quickly, preferably in our favor."

"Yes, that would be preferred," said Hermione with a faint smile.

"So, *Weasley*, while I might not care for Potter very much, in fact, I find him downright annoying, it would be foolish of me *not* to want our very own 'child of prophecy' to cure himself."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Be nice, Draco. How can Harry be annoying you already when he's barely said two words since we got here?"

No one in that room was blind to the sad look in Hermione's eyes as she said this.

A short while later, Ernie returned, smiling widely as he held hands with Padma Patil. When her eyes fell upon Hermione, they immediately started tearing. She ran forward and gave her a hug.

"Oh, thank Merlin! You really *are* here! And I was so sure Ernie was just making another sick joke."

Ernie's mouth fell open. "I would never."

Padma looked at him and lowered her eyes.

"Oh, fine. I would never *again*. And not about her."

"Padma," said Hermione, lifting her arms to hug her back. "I had no idea that *you* were Ernie's girlfriend."

Padma chuckled and pulled back from their hug, but she still kept her hands on Hermione's arms. "I know, I know. I'm out of his league, but pickings are slim around here."

Ernie's mouth fell further. "Ooowww."

Ginny and Ron looked at each other and laughed.

"And *you*," said Padma, suddenly looking at Draco.

She stretched over Hermione and threw her arms around him. He immediately lifted his hands far away from her and looked at Hermione, letting her know that no touching was happening on his part. Still, she crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes.

"Thank you for saving my boyfriend," said Padma, squeezing a little tighter. "I really thought I'd lost him when I saw the Snatchers drag him away."

"There's really no need to thank me," said Draco, waving his hands at Hermione so she could see he was still not touching. Although, he did get a good whiff of Padma's hair, and he was not going to lie, it smelled amazing. In school, he had always thought that the Patil sisters were good-looking, but the cute little Gryffindor glaring at him now with a furrowed brow and a crinkled nose was definitely better.

"Umm, Baby, perhaps it's time you let the other man go, considering the boyfriend you're so grateful is alive is standing right here and all."

Padma loosened her grip on Draco and turned around. "Are you jealous, *Baby*?" she asked with a crooked smirk.

Ernie rolled his eyes. "You're lucky you're fit."

Padma chuckled and stood, finally letting Draco go. "So who should I check first?" she asked.

"Draco," said Hermione. "There's really no reason to check me, and I would like to know if the potion I gave him has taken effect."

"All the same, I'd like to check you," said Padma, taking out her wand and, this time, walking properly over to Draco's side of the bed. "Most of the girls I've seen who've escaped slavery have had more internal damage than they realized." While she spoke professionally, it was hard to miss the sadness behind her eyes. "Malfoy, I'm going to need you to move to the edge of the bed and take off your shirt."

Draco moved so his feet were flat on the floor and pulled off his shirt without hesitation. Unable to stop herself, Padma gave him a onceover and wolf whistled. Even Ginny stretched her neck a little to give him a gander.

"You see, Baby? *These* are the kind of abs I was talking about. Maybe later, Malfoy could tell you his exercise routine."

Ernie stuck his tongue out at her. She smiled and blew him a kiss.

"How long have you two been together?" asked Hermione as Padma began to move her wand around Draco's chest. Ginny stood up and watched closely over Padma's shoulder, mimicking the movements with her own hand.

"Just over two years," answered Ernie.

A blue light flew out of Draco's chest and hovered above it. He looked down at it and could see his insides. Padma put her hand on her chin and began inspecting it thoroughly.

"That looks like a Muggle X-ray," said Hermione, standing up and walking around the bed so she could get a good look at it.

"Yes, that's where I got the idea," said Padma, using her wand to highlight his lungs. She moved closer and studied further before highlighting a small mark on his heart. "A few years back, I went on a mission searching for food in a Muggle town. I came across a bookstore and couldn't help myself. We've never had a trained Healer, Mediwitch or wizard here to teach us anything and have very few books on the subject, so I figured it couldn't hurt."

"Padma's come up with some amazing spells," said Ginny, reaching out her own wand and highlighting a small part of his intestines. "She's the one who's training me."

"Is Parvati a Mediwitch too?" asked Hermione, using this as more of a lead in to ask about her old roommate than anything.

"No, Parvati died in the Battle of Hogwarts," answered Padma, showing little emotion.

"Oh!" Hermione blushed. "I'm sorry, I … I didn't realize."

"It's all right," said Padma. "It's been a long time. I won't say I'm over it but I'm … well, I'm dealing with it. We all are."

There was a long moment where everyone in the room was silent, probably thinking about all of the people they had lost and how 'dealing with it' was all they could do.

"Okay, I'm done," said Padma, finally breaking the unnerving silence. She used her wand to move the 'X-ray' behind her and expand it in size. "All right, Malfoy, so it seems that that potion you took is still hard at work in your system. Do you see these areas I highlighted?"

Draco nodded.

"Those are where the most damage was done. If you notice, there is a faint purple light hovering over each."

Draco and everyone else had to squint but they *could* see it.

"That light is the potion. Your lungs must have been pretty damaged since they still look pretty banged up, and this spot on your heart worries me a bit. Anything on the heart cannot be repaired easily with magic. Even with the potion, it will only do so much. What you need most is more bed rest -"

Draco grunted.

"- but there is a small spell I can do. I'm not really worried about your lungs or anywhere else. The potion should have that healed in a few hours, but we will need to be checking your heart regularly. Needless to say, you won't be fighting in any battles for a while -"

"I can live with that -"

"- and it would probably be best to keep the stress to a minimum."

Draco closed his eyes and groaned. "Well, isn't that just great. Look where I bloody am!" He opened his eyes again and looked at Hermione.

She frowned. "It doesn't hurt to try," she said.

Draco's eyes suddenly drew over to Ron. With him around, stress was pretty much unavoidable. Especially if he kept stealing those glances at Hermione he thought no one noticed. But Draco *always* noticed.

Padma shrunk down the 'X-ray' and put it in a phial she pulled out of her pocket. "I am keeping this so I can record your progress," she explained while turning back towards him. "Now, sit up straight so I can perform the spell."

Draco did just that.

Padma touched the tip of her wand to the spot directly above his heart. A green string of light entered his chest and did not return.

When that was done, Padma instructed Draco to get back into bed. Hermione held the covers up while he climbed in.

"Your turn, Granger," said Padma.

Hermione bit her lip and looked nervously at Draco. He nodded and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. She nodded back and sat down on the edge of the bed, letting Padma do her own 'X-ray'.

Hermione had to remove her shirt but was allowed to keep her bra on. Ernie turned around right away, and Ron was the only other one forced to turn around, which he actually did with little argument. Though, he did not exactly seem pleased that no one made Draco turn.

Padma pulled the blue light out of her chest and another one out of her head. She stood there staring at them for a long while, stroking her chin with her wand. Hermione took this time to steal a glance at Ernie, who was watching her dotingly. It was obvious he loved to see his girlfriend at work.

"I … don't see anything wrong," said Padma after a couple of minutes of studying Hermione's insides. "Ginny, will you take a second look for me?"

Ginny stepped forward and looked closely at the 'X-rays'. "Huh," she said, cocking her head sideways. "Well … what is this?" asked Ginny, highlighting Hermione's ovaries.

"Oh, that." Padma cleared her throat and glanced quickly between everyone in the room. It was clear she knew her audience. "That's just a charm they put on her. I figured she would want to keep it."

Hermione blushed and turned her face away from everyone. She knew it was a Contraceptive Charm, since the Death Eaters did not want slaves having their dirty-blooded babies.

"Yes, keep it, please," Hermione said quietly. Draco snickered.

Ginny caught on right away and removed the highlighting, but Ron was a bit slower on the uptake.

"Why in Merlin would you want to keep any charm put on you by Death Eaters?" he asked, his back still turned in his chair.

Hermione blushed brighter and Draco snickered louder.

"It is a personal decision and I would appreciate it if you respected that."

Ron shut his mouth pretty quickly, but it was unclear whether or not he had figured out what the charm was.

"*Awkward* …" Ernie muttered to himself.

"Everything seems to be in tiptop shape!" said Padma, trying to get them away from the present topic and back to what was important. "There's no bleeding in

your head, which was my greatest concern. Any damage done to it is probably repairable with time and practice. And there *is* quite a bit of scarring in your chest, so my guess is you weren't in the best of conditions not too long ago."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, well, I escaped shortly after Alecto Carrow did quite a number on me. I was pretty sure there was some internal bleeding but I didn't exactly have the means to check something like that."

"Well, it looks like someone took *very* good care of you." Padma glanced at Draco and winked. "You're lucky."

Hermione smiled softly and nodded.

The room went quiet for a moment as she put her shirt back on. Hermione could see Ron fidgeting out of the corner of her eye. She looked over at him. Knowing she was dressed now, he turned back around and the two locked eyes. His face immediately fell into a sorrowful look.

Ron gulped and said, "I did it."

"Did what?" she asked, pursing her eyebrows.

"I killed Amycus Carrow. Back in June, I led a raid on his house because we heard you might be there and I killed him."

"I *was* there," she said. "But it must have been a little less than a year ago." After her escape, Hermione had spent a great deal of time trying to figure out just where she had been and for how long. She had purposely forgotten about time while a slave but, for some reason, now it just seemed important to remember.

"But … that's why she treated you like that, isn't it? Because of what I did."

Hermione sighed deeply before shrugging her shoulders. "That's not what's important, Ron. Amycus Carrow was a horrible man. The world is better off without him, and the torture I endured by his sister's hand was a small price to pay for the lives you saved by killing him."

"You're just as noble as I remember," said Padma with a faint smile.

Hermione kept her eyes on Ron while he stared blankly at a spot on the floor. She called his name several times before he finally looked up at her. "Don't blame yourself for circumstances that were out of your control," she ordered.

Hearing her sound so much like her old self brought tears to Ron's eyes. He

nodded but quickly stood up from his chair. "I'm going for a walk." He hurried out of the room.

Ron did not come back until that evening, bringing Harry with him. They had brought dinner, including a special sort of porridge for Draco, which Padma had instructed him to eat. She had left some time earlier with Ernie. It tasted like tar, but when he opened his mouth to complain, Hermione immediately scolded him and threatened to feed him like a child. There was no way in hell he was letting her degrade him like that in front of Potter and Weasel, so he quickly shut his mouth and cooperated.

After they ate, Harry and Ron left again since they had some sort of meeting to attend. Ginny would be keeping guard again that night, but Dean would be returning in the early morning hours to take her place.

Hermione had no way of keeping time in that room, but she knew Ginny turned off the lights around midnight after stealing a glance at her wristwatch. She waited for what felt like about an hour before carefully slipping her hands under the small mattress she shared with Draco and grabbing her two-way mirror. Ginny had mentioned she could use another bed, but Hermione had no interest. Draco had been sleeping next to her for months now and she really preferred it that way.

One glance at Ginny let Hermione know that she was asleep in her chair. The mirror in hand, she gave Draco's sleeping form a kiss before climbing out of bed and heading towards the washroom. She turned on the light and sat against the door.

"Bronson," she said into the mirror. A moment later, his familiar face appeared.

"Cupcake!" he shouted, his hair all ruffled as he ran his hand through it. He looked exhausted.

"Bronson, what's wro -?"

"I saw him!" he shouted before she could finish. "I saw Theo!"

Hermione's eyes widened. She gulped. "And …?"

"He … he doesn't remember anything," he said, tears visible in his eyes. "He was with his father who asked if he knew me and he looked right at me and said 'no' and that he *thinks* he might have met me once."

"Maybe he was lying to protect -"

"If he's lying then he's the greatest fucking actor in the world. There was *nothing* there, Granger. He's … he's gone." A single tear slid down Bronson's cheek. He wiped it away quickly.

Hermione sighed and wiped her own tears away. "It doesn't matter," she said. "Theo's not an idiot, Bronson. He was skeptical of it all before he ever met you. I am positive that he will come back to our side." She paused. "It is kind of funny, though. Him not remembering you, considering you met him several days before Draco Imperiused him."

"*Yeah*! And I'd say the first night we met was pretty fucking memorable!"

Hermione chuckled, but quickly threw her hand over her mouth.

"Where are you?" asked Bronson, pursing his eyebrows. "Do you have to be quiet or are you just trying not to wake Malfoy?"

"No, I -"

"Granger?" called Ginny's voice from the other room. "Who are you talking to?"

Hermione froze and brought her finger to her lips.

The washroom door opened and Hermione fell backwards. Ginny stared at her upside-down and crinkled her brow. "What are you …?" It was then that she saw the mirror in Hermione's hands. "Where did you get that?" she demanded.

Ginny grabbed for the mirror but Hermione held on tight.

"Ginny, I promise it's not what you think!" Hermione screamed. "It's just a friend! I had to check -"

"Promise me you're not spilling secrets!" Ginny screamed, finally pulling the mirror from Hermione's hands and looking into it.

Bronson stood very still, unsure of what else to do. Maybe if he did not move, she would think he was a statue …

"Who are you?" Ginny demanded.

"That's really not important," said Bronson. "But you … you're Ginny Weasley! I just *love* your radio show! I would listen to it every Friday with Cupcake."

"Cupcake?" asked Ginny, cocking an eyebrow.

"Me," said Hermione, standing up and pulling the mirror back. "This is a friend of mine and Draco's in London. We have the two-way mirrors so we can check on each other."

"Speaking of which," said Bronson. "If you're with her then you must have found the resistance. They didn't kill Malfoy or anything, did they?"

Hermione smirked. "No, Bronson, he's fine." She moved the mirror so he could see Draco's sleeping figure. He had taken another Sleeping Draught after dinner and seemed to be out cold.

"He didn't wake up with all of that commotion?" asked Bronson. "He'd be really upset if he found out he missed two lovely ladies wrestling."

Ginny giggled. She glanced sideways at Hermione and said, "Hubba, hubba."

"He's taken a Sleeping Draught," answered Hermione. "I didn't tell you before because I didn't want to worry you, but Draco was more damaged than we realized by You-Know-Who's punishment. He was really sick, but I made him a potion and he's getting better now."

Bronson's mouth fell open. His eyes narrowed at her. "And you *kept* that from me? Not cool, Cupcake. I told you about Theo the moment -"

"Theo," repeated Ginny. "Theo Nott? Is *he* one of the defected Death Eaters you were talking about?"

Hermione glared at Bronson and he quickly looked away. "Well, shit. How the hell am I supposed to know what's a secret and what isn't?"

"Theo …" Draco muttered from his bed.

Hermione hurried over to him. "Draco, are you awake?" she asked.

He nodded. "Theo … is he … is he all right?" His eyes opened slowly and he looked at her hopefully.

"Bronson, was he hurt at all?" Hermione asked into the mirror.

Bronson sighed. "Yes. He was still as crude as ever, but he was struggling to walk. His father's such an arse. Wouldn't even help him and then he threw a suitcase at him."

"I'll kill that fucker …" Draco said into the pillow. He turned his head so he could

see the mirror. "And his memory?"

Bronson sighed again, much deeper this time. "Gone," he said. "Just … gone."

Draco lay very still for a moment. Hermione reached down and stroked his hair, but he quickly moved away from her touch, sitting up in the bed and putting his feet over the side of it. His shoulders began to bob as Hermione stared at his back. She put the mirror down on the bed and wrapped her arms around him.

"Draco, it … it really is better this way. If you hadn't put the curse on him he would be dead. You know he would."

Draco nodded, but the tenseness of his body let her know he was not convinced.

"I shouldn't have let him sacrifice himself for us," he said. "I shouldn't have let him stay." He paused. "I should have stayed."

Hermione sighed against him. "Draco, don't do this to yourself."

"It was selfish of me -"

"Whether I had Imperiused you or not, You-Know-Who would have punished you. Considering how damaged you already were, you might be dead right now if you had stayed behind."

"But I might not be. Theo's greatest fear was losing his memory. I mean, what exactly am I supposed to do if I run into him on a battlefield? I could never strike at him."

"Stun him."

Draco smirked. "Easier said than done. In many ways, he's more powerful than even me. In my absence, he could quickly become the Dark Lord's favorite."

"Doubtful."

"But he might!" Draco shouted as he stood up and turned to face her.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Stop stressing yourself and sit down!" she ordered, pointing firmly at the bed.

"Stop fucking telling me what to do!"

"Oh, like you *never* do that to me?"

"I'm not sure if this says something about me or them," said Bronson, "but the sound of their arguing is actually relieving my headache."

Ginny, who had been watching Draco and Hermione in awe, suddenly looked down at the mirror and picked it up.

Bronson lied down on the sofa and propped the mirror on his chest. He closed his eyes. "Put me closer, will you?"

Ginny skeptically took a step closer to Draco and Hermione.

"Is that our favorite star-crossed lovers?" called another voice through the mirror.

Ginny watched as her view moved all around, eventually landing on another man, not quite as stunning as the first but not hideous by any means.

"Oh," said the new wizard, pausing for a moment while he stared at her. Then a light triggered. "Ooooh. It's radio show Weasley, right?"

Ginny blushed. "You all listen to me?"

"Yeah, Cupcake made us," said Quigley, sitting down on Bronson's legs and making him squirm. "She liked to hear your voices. Not to mention that Beatles song."

"If I hear that bloody song one more time!" said Bronson, pushing Quigley off of him so he landed with a hard thump on the floor. He grabbed the mirror back. "Malfoy got her the record for Christmas. I curse whoever it was who invented bloody repeat on those players."

Ginny looked over at where Draco and Hermione were still arguing, both standing now while Hermione tried to shove him towards the bed. He put a hand on her forehead and held her at arm's length while she thrashed at him.

"He got her a present?" she asked, looking back at the mirror.

"Presentsss," Bronson emphasized. "And, yet, he only gave *me* one bloody scarf."

"But you *love* that scarf," said Quigley, who had made himself comfortable on the floor. "So who's winning the fight?"

Ginny looked at the arguing couple again. Hermione had her finger in his face and he attempted to bite it.

"I don't think there is winning in this game," she answered.

"Sounds about right," said Bronson with a smirk.

Merlin, that smirk was mesmerizing … And then Ginny remembered she had a boyfriend. An incredibly handsome and thoughtful boyfriend who loved her like no other. But that smirk …

"What are your names?" asked Ginny, trying to distract her thoughts with conversation.

"Don't answer!" Hermione shouted suddenly. "Sorry, Ginny, but it is important that we keep their identities secret for their safety."

"Oh, so now you're ordering *them* around?" said Draco while rolling his eyes. "Stop fucking doing that!"

"Does that mean I can tell her my name?" asked Bronson.

"Fuck no!" Draco shouted. "Keep your mouths fucking shut, you hear me?"

Bronson mock-imitated him before pouting. "Sorry, Red. No go. And probably best you don't mention Theo to anyone either. He has enough trouble."

Ginny nodded.

Bronson and Quigley listened closely. Silence.

"Ah, shit, they're snogging now, aren't they?" said Quigley.

Ginny looked up and, sure enough, Draco was finally lying down in the bed while Hermione pulled the covers up. He had her face cupped in his hands and was kissing her between apologies.

"Good call."

"So …" said Bronson, holding the mirror above him, "tell me about your brother, Charlie. Is he single?" He tried to smirk, but both that and the joke fell short, considering his mind was never far from Theo. The straight, rude Death Eater who was completely wrong for him in every way. But just so damn cute.

Ginny's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh!" she said, finally getting that ogling this good-looking stranger … it was much more innocent now. "Umm, well … that's a bit of a complicated question. My oldest brother, Bill, died last year and Charlie …

well, he's sort of been taking care of his wife and daughter. If you catch my drift." Ginny frowned down at the mirror. It was obvious she was not pleased by this.

"Weaselette, give me the mirror."

Ginny looked over to see Draco lying down with his hand stretched out. Hermione gave him a stern look and crossed her arms.

"*Please*," he added a bit scornfully.

Ginny walked over and handed him the mirror. Draco took it and looked Bronson over. "You look like shit," he said.

Bronson frowned. "You don't look so great yourself."

Draco wished he could argue, but he was most likely right. "My insides are bleeding, I'm lying in a hospital bed in the fucking lair of people who want to kill me, and I haven't smoked a cigarette or shagged my girlfriend in over a week. What's your bloody excuse?" Well, it seemed like arguing came easier than he expected.

"I haven't shagged in over two months. You can thank your bloody friend for that one." Bronson smirked.

Draco could not help but smirk back. "All right, you win." He paused and pursed his lips. "Look, I've been thinking it over and I want you two to get out of London. I can tell you where to go to -"

"Sorry, no can do," said Bronson.

Draco closed his eyes and rubbed at his temple. Oh, his aching head. "The only reason the Dark Lord hasn't come for you two yet is because he's plotting something. I know he is, and it's not safe for you -"

"We're not going anywhere without Theo and Fiona."

"Neither of them are in any immediate danger and -"

"Not in any immediate danger?" repeated Quigley, sitting up from the floor and grabbing the mirror. "My sister is a fucking slave!"

"Yes, and she likes it," said Draco.

Quigley's face twisted in anger.

"Sorry, but that's the reality. She doesn't want to leave and she probably won't until that Rodolphus fucker is dead. There's nothing you can do to help her right now."

"I'm not going anywhere," Quigley spat before tossing the mirror back at Bronson.

"Why the fuck is everyone in my life stubborn as shit?" asked Draco, glancing sideways at Hermione.

She smirked and rubbed his arm dotingly. "Just lucky, I guess."

Draco grunted. "Fine, stay then. But, if you can, I want you to keep an eye on Theo. And, if opportunity presents itself, you get him back over to our fucking side."

Bronson raised his eyebrows. "Are you actually giving me permission to woo him?"

"If that's what it takes then yes."

Bronson beamed at him. "Consider it done!"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Whatever, just get some fucking sleep or something. You won't be wooing anyone looking like a bloody corpse."

"You underestimate me, Malfoy."

"I doubt it. Night, fucker." Draco tossed the mirror to Hermione.

"I really miss that charm of his," said Bronson.

Hermione smiled. "It's all out of love. Goodnight you two. Stay safe."

"Thanks. You too. Love you, Cupcake."

She blew a kiss at the mirror before touching it and making Bronson's image disappear. She sighed as soon as it was gone. "I really wish they had taken your advice."

"I told you. Stubborn as shit," said Draco, putting his head in her lap. Hermione began to stroke his hair. "Weaselette, I'm sure I don't need to tell you this but -"

"I know," said Ginny. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about Nott."

Draco nodded.

"But I don't understand. Is he or isn't he defected?"

"He is," said Hermione. "He just doesn't remember that." She frowned. "It's complicated."

"Yeah, I can see that," said Ginny, looking at the mirror in Hermione's hands.

Hermione held it out to her. "Sorry I hid this. I wanted to ask but I was afraid you wouldn't let me have it. We promised them we would check in every three days and I didn't want to worry them."

Ginny took the mirror and sighed. "It's fine. But I should probably hold onto it for now." She started tapping her finger on it as she bit her lip. "But I guess I can make a point to request guard duty in three days."

Hermione looked up at her hopefully. "Really?"

Ginny nodded and put the mirror in her pocket. "But no more secrets. The last thing we need is to give everyone a reason to be suspicious of the two of you. If this is going to work -"

"We'll cooperate!" said Hermione. When Draco did not agree right away, she smacked his arm.

His eyes shot open and he looked at Ginny. "Yes, yes. I'll be a good boy. It's not like I'm the one who snuck the mirror in here." He closed his eyes again and smirked.

Hermione smiled softly. "Arse."

The two of them fell asleep again pretty quickly, but Ginny was wide awake until Dean showed up in the early morning hours. As soon as she left the medical ward, she headed straight for Harry's room, locking the door behind her and climbing into bed with him.

His eyes opened slowly and he could immediately tell she was in great distress. "Ginny, what's wrong?"

She shook her head and wiped away some tears. "I'm going to tell you something, but you have to promise not to tell anyone. Especially Ron. I promised Granger I wouldn't say anything, but I just … I *need* to tell someone."

Harry nodded. "All right. I'll keep quiet."

"She … she has a mirror. A two-way mirror she uses to keep in contact with two of their friends who are still trapped in the city. So they can all make sure everyone is

safe. I listened to the whole conversation. They're legit."

Harry nodded again. "I'm glad."

"But, it's just …" Ginny bit her lip and fought off a whimper. "She talked to them, Harry. She talked to them so easily, and she sounded so much like her old self. I mean … is she never going to be like that with us again? Is this it? These awkward, forced conversations we keep having."

"I don't think so," said Harry, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close. "The fact that she can talk to anyone like that is a good sign, isn't it?"

"Yes, I … I think so." She paused, then she started chuckling into his chest. "Merlin, I wish you could have heard it. Even Malfoy seemed like a regular person with them."

"Hmm."

Harry continued to hold Ginny as she slowly began to fall asleep in his arms. The fact that Draco Malfoy might actually be a regular person was a bit disturbing to him, but, more and more, he was starting to think that maybe this was the case. So the git he had hated in school, the Death Eater who stood loyally by Voldemort's side, the wizard who had saved his best friend and gazed at her with nothing but love in his eyes … all one and the same. He was human after all.

And Hermione … Harry's greatest fear, even bigger than facing Voldemort again, was that he would never have that friendship back the way it was. He relied on it for so many years and every day Hermione was gone had felt empty to him. And he wanted her to talk to him. Like a normal person. But, first, he had to remember how to be one around her himself.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

After two more days of being locked in that room, Draco and Hermione were becoming restless. Especially Draco.

Padma had come in during Ernie's guard shift and checked Draco again. He was healing nicely, but she wanted him to continue with bed rest. Draco was more than happy to express his displeasure with this diagnosis.

"I am literally going insane," he said while pulling at his hair. "And does no one in this bloody place have a fucking cigarette?"

"Of course we do," said Ernie. "But there's no smoking in the medical ward."

"Not to mention you shouldn't be smoking in your current condition. No cigarettes," instructed Padma, looking sternly at Ernie, who was so obviously devising a plan to sneak Draco a pack in his head.

Draco grunted. "Then how about a fucking window?"

"I went four and a half years without a window, Draco. You can deal," said Hermione.

Draco grunted louder. He hated when she did that. Reminding him of her time as a slave and making him feel like shit for complaining when it could be so much worse. Still, Draco was pretty certain she was a lot stronger than he was. He would be an absolutely horrible prisoner.

Before Draco could respond, the door to the room burst open and several wizards and witches in cloaks hurried inside. Ernie and Padma jumped out of their chairs instantly and Hermione yanked the comforter over Draco's face, pulling on her own hood - luckily, she had been wearing her cloak since it was always so cold in that room - and leaning forward so no one could see her.

"Get them over here! Quickly!" ordered an aged female voice Hermione would know anywhere. It was Professor McGonagall. "Ms. Patil, thank heavens you're here!"

"What happened?" asked Padma, quickly forgetting about Draco and Hermione and following McGonagall as several bloody bodies were carried into the ward.

"We were bombarded by Death Eaters when we stopped in Godric's Hollow. Not Snatchers, but an actual swarm of Death Eaters. They found their way into our tunnels and were there when we arrived. What could they possibly have been looking for?"

Hermione's breath hitched. She reached under the covers and grabbed Draco's hand. They must have trailed them. But how …?

"Mr. Macmillan, what are you doing in here?" asked McGonagall, her steps getting closer.

"Uhh … I …"

"Who are you?"

Hermione knew McGonagall was looking at her, but she did not answer.

"Who is this patient?" She must have been looking at Ernie again, because he began stuttering.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed firmly onto Hermione's hood and pulled it back. She whipped her head in her professor's direction, locked eyes with her and gulped. "Hello, Professor."

McGonagall's eyes widened. "Ms. Granger? Is that really you?"

Hermione nodded.

"Then who -?" She grabbed the comforter and pulled, but whoever was under it fought her on it. After a bit of wrestling, she got it off, only to find herself staring down at Draco Malfoy. Now her eyes nearly bulged out of her skull.

Draco smiled. "Afternoon, Professor. I'd comment on the lovely day, but I really have no idea since I've been stuck in here. Wounded prisoner, you know?"

Just then, Ginny walked into the room and gasped. McGonagall turned around and narrowed her eyes. Ginny tried to bolt.

"Ms. Weasley, come here!"

Ginny gulped and stepped forward.

"You too, Mr. Macmillan."

Ernie stared at the floor as he approached the bed. McGonagall waved her wand and a white curtain appeared around them.

"Oh no," said Ernie, turning pale. "The curtain of silence. We're in soooo much trouble."

"Ms. Weasley, *what* is going on?" asked McGonagall in a shrill voice.

"Umm, well, we … we found Granger." Ginny smiled and held her hands out towards Hermione, presenting her proudly.

"Yes, I can see that. And what of Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco groaned and scooted so he was sitting up in the bed. "You sound so scornful, Professor. Was I not your favorite student in school?"

"Certainly not!"

"Ah … Oww."

"Now, Professor, please calm down," said Ginny. "Malfoy is defected. Granger escaped several months ago and he has been keeping her safe. When they were discovered just over a week ago, they fled the city and we found them hiding in the mountains."

"How do we know he is -?"

"He saved me," said Ernie, glancing at Draco as he continued to face his old professor. "Last year when I was captured. He's the one who got me out. I didn't tell anyone but Padma for his protection."

McGonagall stared down her nose, looking through her squared spectacles at Draco. He could not help but smirk at the familiarity of that look. It was like he was in school again, and that definitely was not the most terrible of feelings.

"He's the one who's been helping Andromeda and the others too," said Ginny. "We called her and confirmed. And he saved Neville."

McGonagall whipped her head towards Ginny.

"He's with them," she added. "Safe and in hiding. *And* three Death Eaters were killed during their escape."

"Yes, and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named seems quite pleased about it," said McGonagall, staring out of a crack in the curtain. "Currently, we have more time sensitive matters to deal with. Ms. Weasley, get out there and help Ms. Patil."

Ginny nodded and ran out of the curtain.

"Mr. Macmillan, you stay here and keep an eye on our … our *guest*."

Ernie nodded and summoned a chair before sitting down in it.

"Ms. Granger."

Hermione looked up at her old professor expectantly.

McGonagall stared down at her for a moment before smiling softly. "Welcome back." She leaned down and hugged Hermione, bringing tears to both of their eyes. Then she hurried out of the curtain to join the others.

Hermione, Draco and Ernie all sat around listening as the others worked on

healing three wounded people. Hermione did not think she knew two of them, but one was Seamus Finnegan, and he was suffering the worst of it.

While the loyal part of Hermione felt like she should hate Seamus because Theo did - for killing that Death Eater, Helena, he had cared about - she just could not bring herself to do it. Like most resistance members, Seamus simply thought he was killing just another Death Eater. They were all the same to him. He did not realize that some were better than others. Just regular people thrown into a horrible situation.

Merlin, she hoped Theo was not the one to hurt him like this. With his memories lost, he would not have known to put revenge behind him and just let Seamus go.

Still, even if he had done it, Hermione knew she would forgive him. Because she loved Theo. She was not sure when it happened but she did. She loved all of those idiots. Theo, Bronson, Quigley … They were her safety blanket, along with Draco, and she missed them terribly. Everything felt so normal, so natural with them. But here … she was starting to fear that nothing with her old friends would ever feel normal again.

"We're losing him! He's bleeding out! Quick, Padma, do something!" someone shouted.

"I … I …"

Hermione stood nervously in front of the curtain, staring through a crack at a panicked Padma who knew she did not have a spell for this.

"Granger."

Hermione turned and looked at Draco.

"Remember when we were studying Healing Spells in the basement? There was that one that stopped bleeding? Worked nicely after we cut up our favorite test dummy." He smirked.

Hermione nodded.

"It works on more than just flesh wounds. If you can find the artery that's damaged …"

Hermione's eyes went wide. She took off her cloak and threw it over the back of the chair.

"Hold it!" shouted Ernie, rising to his feet. "They'll *kill* me if I let you out there."

"Seamus is dying, Ernie!" Hermione shouted. "Please, just let me help!"

Ernie stopped and listened to the screams and tears coming from the other side of that curtain. He gulped and nodded.

Hermione sighed in relief before grabbing onto the curtain and heading straight towards Seamus's bed. There were several gasps as she passed people, but she made sure to keep her head low. She could not look at anyone right now, not when she had to focus on the task at hand.

"Where's he bleeding out?" asked Hermione as she approached Padma and Ginny, pushing some other people who were crowding around Seamus out of the way.

"I … I'm holding it," said Padma, her fingers inside of a wound on his neck.

Hermione nodded. "Ginny, your wand." She held out her hand.

Ginny looked at it skeptically.

"Ginny."

Ginny glanced up and caught her eye.

"Please, you can trust me."

She nodded before slowly handing it over.

Hermione took the wand. She held it over the wound and was about to instruct Padma to remove her fingers when she accidentally succumbed to the sounds of the room and heard the whispers. She looked around to see everyone staring at her. Familiar faces. Unfamiliar ones. Her heart started beating fast and her palms began to sweat. Her whole body convulsed as the fear, the anxiety of having so many people pay attention to her took over. This many eyes had not been on her since that first night she had been captured. When all of Voldemort's followers watched as she had her innocence stolen from her.

The room around her became dark and gray, furnished with the green and silver furniture of Malfoy Manor as lightning struck outside of the windows, letting just enough light into the room for her to see everyone's faces, laughing as she was tortured in front of them. The sound of thunder echoed in her ears as Lucius Malfoy stepped forward, pulling her already broken body to her feet, throwing her

onto a table, undoing his trousers …

As Hermione's breathing became fast and heavy, Ginny grabbed her hand and stared down each and every person. "Back away, will you? This is not a fucking show! If you don't know healing magic then get the hell out!"

No one moved. Ginny's eyes drew to Ron and Harry, who were standing in the doorway. Neither looked like they knew what they were supposed to do.

Then the curtain flew open and Draco stormed out with Ernie running after him. "Oh shit! Oh shit!" He held his wand out protectively as people gasped even louder than before.

"Granger," Draco said as he reached her, grabbing onto her shoulders and giving her a little shake. "Granger!"

Hermione snapped back to reality and looked at him, her lips slightly parted as her eyes filled with tears.

"Granger, get out of your fucking head and focus on the man dying in front of you! Got it?"

Hermione slowly nodded.

"Forget everyone else," said Draco. "Just you and I are here, all right? We're just in our basement, practicing our spells on our test dummy. You understand?"

She nodded again, blinking her eyes a few times and trying hard to bring herself to that safe place. She took several deep breaths and looked down at Seamus, whose eyes were wide open and watching her, looking very afraid as Padma pressed hard on the spot keeping him alive.

Hermione gulped back her fears and turned her body towards Seamus. Draco went and stood on the other side of him so that Hermione could catch his gaze if need be. She pointed her wand and readied herself.

"Padma, when I say 'now' I'm going to need you to remove your fingers, all right?"

Padma nodded nervously.

Hermione nodded back and began waving Ginny's wand over the wound, doing several complicated loops before shouting, "Now!"

Padma removed her fingers and Hermione put the tip of the wand right above the

artery.

"*Sano Cruentis*!"

The bleeding stopped. Padma and Ginny sighed in relief.

"There's no time to celebrate," said Hermione, catching Draco's eye as the voices began to enter her ears again. "He's not in the clear just yet."

Both witches nodded and Padma went to work on healing his neck wound while Ginny took her wand back from Hermione and focused on a less severe wound on his chest.

But just when Padma got his neck wound closed, Seamus began to shake, small at first so they barely noticed but, before long, he was convulsing frantically.

"Hold him still!" Padma ordered.

Ginny and Hermione each grabbed onto his legs while Padma held firmly onto his shoulders. His neck continued to jerk, threatening to open the wound again so Draco grabbed his head and held it in place, but then he felt something wet on his hands. He lifted one to see blood on it.

"He's bleeding out of his head!" Draco told Padma. "Quick, turn him over!"

Padma waved her wand and Seamus flipped onto his stomach. The wound on his head was small, but a lot of blood was coming from it.

"He's hemorrhaging!" shouted Hermione from the other side.

"What about that spell from before?" asked Ginny.

Draco shook his head. "The wound's too small. No, there's …" He clenched his eyes shut and rubbed at his head to think. "There's this spell Professor Snape taught me years ago. After he used it on me." Draco opened his eyes and glanced slyly at Harry, who instantly knew what spell he was talking about. "*Vulnera Sanentur*. It's the only thing I can think of that might work. Unless you have a better idea, Patil?"

Padma looked down at a convulsing Seamus and shook her head.

"Okay then. Put your wand on the wound and do everything I -"

"No," said Padma, holding her wand out towards him. "We don't have time for you

to teach me a spell. *You* have to do it."

Draco looked down at the wand and then at Padma skeptically.

"I don't know the spell, Malfoy. I might do it wrong. Please," she said pleadingly.

Draco looked at Hermione, who nodded at him. He turned back to the wand and took it slowly, noticing as everyone else in the room reached into their pockets and aimed at him.

Ernie stood so Draco was blocked from most wands and held his own firmly out in front of him. Ginny turned and did the same.

"Oh, bloody hell," said Ron as he held Harry up, since his legs had given out.

"I suppose you have to drag us over there," said Harry.

Ron mumbled several foul words as he half-carried Harry over to where Ernie and Ginny were standing. They took their positions and held out their own wands.

Hermione watched closely as Draco traced Padma's wand over the wound on Seamus's head, reciting an incantation that she could not make out, but sounded almost as if he was singing. After he performed the spell once, the bleeding seemed to stop and Seamus's body eased.

"He's killing him!" someone shouted.

But Draco did not lose concentration. He repeated the spell again and the bleeding stopped completely, as well as the shaking. A third time and the wound closed. Two more times and it was almost as if it had never been there in the first place.

Draco flicked Padma's wand and Seamus returned to his back. He handed it back to her and stared down at the wizard in the bed, whose breathing had become much steadier but was still a bit heavy.

"Who did this to you?" he asked, the same fear Hermione had about Theo rolling around in his mind.

Seamus continued to gaze at him, his eyes watery as his lips quivered. He gulped and worked hard to mutter out the word, "N-N-Nottt."

Draco's throat went dry as his breath hitched. He somehow managed to keep his cool as he said, "Theo?"

"N-n-no," said Seamus, trying to shake his head but unable to move it much with the wound on his neck. "H-his fa -" He gulped again. "F-father."

Both Draco and Hermione let out a breath of relief. Thank Merlin.

"What the fuck is a Death Eater doing in our base?" someone shouted.

Draco and Hermione both looked to see that no one had lowered their wands. The person who had spoken was Cormac McLaggen. Hermione frowned. Well, he was as pleasant as ever.

But then her eyes drew over to a small, blonde girl standing behind him. She had a soft but pleasant smile on her face and was the only one who did not have her wand raised. She tilted her head and smiled wider as Hermione looked at her, eventually walking over in a dreamy state.

"Luna," said Hermione as she approached. "I'd … I'd heard rumors years ago that you were dead." She remembered Yaxley had been her owner at the time, and he had been trying to break her spirit when there was still a little bit of fight left in her.

"Oh, no," said Luna, still smiling brightly. "A spell hit me a long time ago that looked like the Killing Curse, but I stood right back up about twenty minutes later."

Hermione whipped back around and looked at Draco. He shrugged.

"I think it was me. About three years ago. My first attempt at it on a battlefield."

Without another moment's hesitation, Luna took out her wand and aimed it at the others.

"Luna, what are you doing?" asked Cormac with contempt. "He's a Death Eater!"

"Yes, and look who he brought with him!" she said, beaming at Hermione. "And he just helped Seamus quite selflessly."

"Who bloody cares? He's a *Death Eater*!"

Suddenly, Cormac waved his wand, sending Ernie, Ginny and Hermione sliding in one direction, and Ron, Harry and Luna in the other. He then aimed it at Draco, but Padma quickly grabbed him and pulled him behind her, pointing her own wand at Cormac.

"Stand down, Padma!"

"No, you stand down, Cormac! Malfoy is not our enemy anymore!"

"Don't make me hex you!"

"Cormac, if you keep pointing your bloody wand at my girlfriend, I won't hesitate to beat your arse!" shouted Ernie, storming back towards him.

Before Draco knew what was happening, the entire room was immersed in chaos. Everyone was shooting hexes and jinxes at each other. He hung low and moved over to where Hermione was standing, grabbing her in his arms and cradling her protectively while they hid behind Seamus's bed. He looked over it and saw Cormac using a Jelly-Legs Jinx on Ernie. On instinct, he held out his hand, waved his fingers and summoned Cormac's wand to him. The other wizard screeched and whipped around in surprise. Draco stood back up and handed the wand to Hermione, who was more than happy to use it to cast a Stunning Spell on Cormac.

Throughout all of this, McGonagall was shouting at everyone to stop, but no one was listening. Finally hitting her limit, she raised her wand high above her head and shouted, "EVERYONE, HALT!"

A streak of blue light shot out of her wand like lightning and hit everyone. All movement ceased, and not by choice. She turned her angry, bespectacled eyes on Draco and Hermione first.

"You two," she said, pointing her wand and unfreezing them. "Put down Mr. McLaggen's wand."

Hermione put it on the bed beside Seamus.

McGonagall then pointed her wand at Harry, Ron, Ginny, Ernie, and Padma. "Ms. Patil, you will stay here and heal who is needed. Come to my chambers the moment you are finished. The rest of you, follow me," she said sternly, turning on her foot and trotting out of the room.

Ginny ran over to Harry, who was still being held up by Ron, and did her spell on his legs while Padma removed the Jelly-Legs Jinx from Ernie. Then Padma went back over to Seamus and the others hurried after McGonagall, Draco holding tightly onto Hermione's hand as they walked. They all had to step over a stunned Cormac to get out of the room, every single one of them giving him a little kick as they did so.

Just outside of the door, Dean and Terry were standing in the hallway. "Ah, did we miss the action?" asked Dean.

"Did you two *know* about this?" asked McGonagall, noticing the lack of surprise in both boys' faces as Hermione and Draco walked out of the room.

"Uhh …" said Terry as he and Dean looked at each other. "Oh no! A Death Eater!" he shouted fairly unconvincingly.

"In *our* base? How could this ever have happened?" said Dean, an even worse actor than Terry.

"Well, I suppose you two can come right along with the rest of us!" ordered McGonagall.

Dean and Terry went white.

"But, Professor," said Dean. "I came to check on Seamus and -"

"Mr. Finnegan is fine. You can thank Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Granger for that," said McGonagall, motioning in their direction.

Dean sneered. "Ah, man! Stop giving me reasons to not bloody hate you!"

"So next time he should let your friend die then?" said Hermione, holding her head up high as she squeezed Draco's hand tighter.

Draco chuckled. "Stand down, Love."

Upon hearing this word, McGonagall's eyes suddenly drew to Draco and Hermione's clasped hands. "Dear Gods," she said with a gasp. She quickly gulped back everything and shook her head. This was not the time. "All of you, follow me. I think it's time we called Kingsley back here. Clearly, this place has become a madhouse in our absence."

Draco and Hermione looked nervously at each other before following the others down the corridor. This was it. The moment they had been waiting for and dreading. Within the next few hours, they would either be here for good, or back out in the world running for their lives. At this point, neither outcome sounded particularly appealing.

# Chapter 32: Across the Universe

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Hermione nervously shook her foot as she and Draco sat in the bedroom of McGonagall's chambers. Everyone else was in the front office she shared with Kingsley, quite obviously discussing them. Why they were not part of that conversation, she did not understand, but she was afraid of arguing over it since she did not want to give anyone a reason not to trust them.

"They're trailing us, Granger."

Hermione spun her head towards Draco. This was the first time he had spoken since they were put in there well over an hour ago.

"The first place we went was Godric's Hollow and they trailed us there."

"Yes, I'd gathered that," she said.

"If they don't let me stay, it is only a matter of time before they find me."

Hermione frowned. "Then we'll just have to be cleverer about -"

"No." Draco looked up from the spot he had been staring at on the floor and gazed very seriously at her. "If they don't let me stay you can't come with me, Granger."

Hermione's heart jerked.

"It's too dangerous out there. I won't let you put yourself at risk like that when it's not necessary."

"It's not your decision," she said sternly, trying hard to hide her pain from the thought that she might lose him. "I have already told you that wherever you go I go, and I won't be changing my mind about that anytime soon."

"But -"

"Not 'buts', Draco. If they kick you out then I'm going with you."

Draco took a deep breath and gulped. "But I love you too much to put you in that sort of danger. I'm sorry, Granger, but I just … I can't let you do that."

Hermione sighed deeply and cupped Draco's face in her hands, forcing him to look into her eyes. "We're in this together, Draco. We have been since the day you took me in. The pain of losing you would hurt far more than even an infinite amount of torture. If we have to leave here then we will run, we will fight, we will know that we tried our hardest and, if we're captured and executed, we will do it with dignity. Understand?"

Draco smirked and nodded. "And we would take as many Death Eater fuckers as we could down with us, right?"

"Damn straight!"

"Aw, Love, you know you shouldn't use language like that when all it does is turn me on."

Hermione giggled as Draco began kissing her neck. "This is not the place!" she said, even though she made no attempt to stop him.

Draco went up for her lips and, soon, she was lost, forgetting all about where they were and kissing the wizard she loved in a way she had not been able to in days. That was what happened when you always had an audience watching your every move.

"I love you, Granger," Draco said breathily between parts of their lips.

"I love you too," she said back, running her hands into his hair and clutching tighter.

"Can we change the bloody channel now?" said Ron, turning away from the wall McGonagall had cast a spell on to make invisible from their side alone, so that they might keep an eye on their 'guests'.

"I am afraid not, Mr. Weasley. Kingsley gave us specific instructions to keep a close eye on them until he gets here," said McGonagall, reading over the parchment she had taken notes on while her former students told her everything that had been happening.

"I really don't think we need to be keeping this close of an eye on them," said Ginny, who was actually watching the display with incredible fascination and interest. "They're not going to make a run for it, because they know if they do they're as good as dead. You heard what they said about Godric's Hollow. It was the first place they went and, somehow, they were trailed there. Maybe they got a week's head start but it is only a matter of time before they -"

"We're *not* sending them out there again," Harry said sternly. "If Malfoy's part of the deal to keep Granger here then we *need* to let him. It's my fault she was captured in the first place. I can't lose her to them again."

"How exactly is it *your* fault?" asked Ron, who had settled in a chair facing away from the invisible wall. "I'm the one who let her go off alone. If I had just stayed with her or made her come with me …"

"Yes, and, from what you have told me, I am sure Mr. Malfoy thinks it was *his* fault," said McGonagall. "And let us not forget that Rubeus has always blamed himself for running too quickly. Even Ms. Weasley has mentioned on more than one occasion that if she had not tried to run back for her mother's body in the Great Hall, then she would not have been attacked by Greyback and Mr. Weasley would not have come to her aid."

Harry, Ron and Ginny all blushed brightly.

"You can believe what you want but there is no one person to blame for what happened. It was just an unfortunate circumstance and, now that she is here, it is high time you let your guilt go and focus on what is important. And that is Ms. Granger."

Suddenly, everyone was looking at her hopefully.

"Does that mean you're going to let her stay?" Harry asked anxiously.

"It is not my decision, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall, putting down her parchment and adjusting her glasses on her nose. "But even *I* cannot deny the evidence that Mr. Malfoy is a changed wizard." She glanced slyly towards the invisible wall, where Draco was practically giggling while Hermione gave his sides a little tickle.

"Aw, they're adorable," said Ernie, leaning against the wall and watching them closely.

"I think I just vomited a little," said Terry from a chair on the other side of the room.

"I've been vomiting ever since they bloody got here," said Ron with disdain.

The door clicked open and they all turned towards it, hoping it was Kingsley. Only Ernie looked happy when they saw it was Padma instead.

Her eyes immediately drew to the invisible wall. "Are you all watching them snog?" she asked, her eyebrows pursing in offense for the couple.

"Naw, they just started," said Ernie, turning back towards them.

"I never realized you were all a bunch of voyeurs," she said, walking towards her boyfriend. "And, *Professor*. I'm surprised at you." Padma put her hands on her hips and smirked.

"Just following orders, Ms. Patil," said McGonagall with a small smile. "How are the patients?"

"They'll live," answered Padma while grabbing onto Ernie's hand. She then looked over at Dean, who was leaning forward in his chair. "*All* of them. It was a close call with Seamus but he's fine now. Just sleeping it off. He should be up and running again in a few days."

Dean sighed in relief.

"I should probably warn you all that rumors are spreading pretty quickly out there," said Padma, looking in on Draco and Hermione as they stood up and stretched their legs.

"Which one of them are they spreading rumors about?" asked Ginny.

"Both," answered Padma. "Mainly Malfoy, but many are also saying that Granger has been brainwashed and turned to the dark side, bringing a Death Eater with her to infiltrate our base. Only Luna seems to believe that it's actually the other way around."

"What? That Malfoy's come to the side of light?" asked Ron, stealing a glance at the invisible wall, and immediately regretting it when Draco leaned in and stole a kiss from Hermione. "This bloody blows," he muttered to himself.

"It is unfortunate that she only ever seems to be herself when he's around, especially when the rest of us can't seem to be *ourselves* when he's around," said Ginny with a frown. She watched as Hermione began scanning the books on McGonagall's shelf, her face as bright as she remembered it once being. Draco stood beside her, gazing at her with as much wonder as she gave the books.

Just then, they all heard a loud thumping coming from outside the door, and it was getting closer.

Harry looked at McGonagall and gulped. "Sounds like Hagrid's heard the rumors."

Not even a second later, the door burst open with such a force it split down the middle. Hagrid stood panting in the doorway. "Is it true?" he asked, his eyes immediately falling upon Harry. "Is she really …?"

Hagrid froze as he noticed the invisible wall. Hermione was currently facing it with her nose in a book, making everyone nostalgic of their days at Hogwarts. She smiled.

"Draco, did you *know* that it only took Morgana le Fay a week to become an Animagus?"

"Yes, well, when you're aided by dark magic things tend to come a little easier, don't they?" said Draco, who was flipping through a different book. "A small price to pay for your soul, I'd say."

Hermione looked up at him and rolled her eyes. "What form do you think you would take if you became an Animagus?"

"A snake," they both answered together, along with everyone else who was watching them.

Draco looked curiously at the wall, but then quickly shook it off and narrowed his eyes at Hermione. "And just what's wrong with that? It would be handier than some large animal if I needed to sneak around."

"What if you needed to run away?"

"Then I would slither away and hide. Done." He smirked.

Hermione rolled her eyes again.

"Well, how about *you*, Princess? Would you rather be some large animal that can be easily spotted?"

"No, I'd rather be something with wings," she answered.

"Like the blackbird?" asked Draco.

Ginny and Ron looked at each other, both gulping back tears as they thought of

the song they had played for Hermione every week for years. It meant so much that it had actually reached her.

"Maybe," said Hermione. "I wouldn't mind being something large like an eagle or a falcon, but I'm pretty sure I'd end up as a finch or something."

"An eagle or a falcon …" repeated Draco. "Well, that's easy enough. You already have the talons."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and, with a faint smile, said, "Don't make me use them on you."

Draco chuckled and went back to his book, now humming the melody of 'Blackbird' as he read. A tear slid down Hermione's cheek as she listened. She quickly glanced over at the door.

"Why do yeh have 'er locked in a room? Let 'er out o' there!"

Everyone cleared out of the way as Hagrid marched forward, making the ground shake and Draco and Hermione look around in a panic, wondering if perhaps there was an earthquake.

They could not see him before, but just behind Hagrid stood Arthur Weasley, who looked angrily at his two children as he entered the room and shut the broken door behind him.

"Dad!" squeaked Ginny.

Ron jumped out of his chair and stood at attention.

Arthur's eyes drew to Hermione behind the invisible wall. He gasped. "We will discuss this later," he said sternly before following after Hagrid, who practically tore the door off of its hinges to get it open.

Draco pressed himself against the wall as the half-giant entered, his eyes going wide as he realized no amount of wandless magic he might know was strong enough to keep someone of that size off of him.

"Hagrid!" shouted Hermione, putting her book down and looking unsurely at her old friend, who she was fairly certain was angry.

Without another word, or even a glance in Draco's direction, Hagrid rushed forward and scooped Hermione up in a tight, bone-crushing hug. Well, at least he was not angry at *her*.

He wept loudly as he held her. Hermione brought her own arms up to hug him back but they barely fit around his sides. Tears fell from her eyes as he began to mutter apologies between sighs.

"If I'd of known yeh were followin' me … If I'd of looked back …"

"Hagrid, it's not your fault," she said, but it sounded a bit muffled since he was squeezing her right into his thick coat.

Draco could not help but chuckle at the sight, but then he saw Arthur Weasley standing just behind Hagrid, and his eyes were definitely on him.

Hagrid put Hermione down and tried to straighten her up a bit, only making her appearance even more disheveled than before. "Yeh look the same," he said. Hermione blushed. "Thanks," she said, automatically touching one of the larger scars on her face. She tried hard to smile. "So do you."

Her eyes kept darting towards Draco. He knew she wanted him closer, but he was a bit frozen in place right now. Just a few hours ago, his mere presence had caused a riot among allies. What was to stop that from happening again?

Still, Draco managed one small, sideways step in Hermione's direction. Hagrid's eyes immediately shot towards him. Draco froze again.

And then the giant man was coming for him, grabbing him hard and squeezing the life out of him. Merlin, he was crushing him to death! He was suffocating him, squashing his bones, making him nothing but a lump of platinum-blond jelly in his large, oaf-like hands -

"Thank yeh," Hagrid whimpered suddenly. "Thank yeh."

Once Draco took a moment to finally relax, he realized that what he had thought was crushing was actually just a really tight hug. All right. He could get past his prejudices against giants for a few moments and let this happen. It was better than death, anyway.

"Umm, Hagrid … do you think you could loosen your grip on him just a smidgeon?" asked Hermione, noticing that Draco was starting to turn a bit blue.

"Oh, err … sorry," said Hagrid, finally putting Draco down and straightening him up as unsuccessfully as he had Hermione.

Draco took a moment to catch his breath before saying, "Well, *that* was an unexpected greeting. Definitely not the norm around here."

Hermione chuckled. And then her eyes fell upon the balding man behind Hagrid. "Mr. Weasley," she said.

Finally taking his eyes off of Draco, Arthur stepped forward and pulled Hermione into a hug, almost sobbing as loudly as Hagrid. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

"About three days, I believe," she answered, looking to Draco for reassurance even though she really did not need any. She knew she was right.

Arthur turned around and shot his two children and Harry standing in the doorway an angry look. "Three days?" he shouted. "Is that why you were in the medical ward when I went looking for you that one night, Harry?"

"Uhh …" Harry looked to Ron and Ginny for help, but they were too busy trying to avoid their father's eyes to be of any use. He ran a hand through his messy hair and stared at the floor. "It might have been."

"I don't believe it. How could you not have told me right away?"

"Well, to be fair," said Ernie, poking his head into the room, "her guest *did* just cause a riot a bit ago merely by being present."

Arthur then looked at Draco again, causing him to take another step closer to Hermione. As protection of sorts. He winced when Arthur's arm flung at him, but then he realized he was holding it out. Draco cocked his head and hesitated for a moment before reaching out and shaking it. He looked into Arthur's eyes.

"Thank you for bringing her back to us."

Draco said nothing but managed to give him a faint smile. He glanced sideways at Hermione and saw that she was doing the same.

"Why are the two of them locked back here, Minerva?" asked Arthur, turning and facing McGonagall. "They don't even have wands so what's the point?"

"Just following orders, Arthur," said McGonagall.

"Whose orders?"

"Mine," said a deep, authoritative voice that made every single person in that room shake in their boots. They all looked to see Kingsley Shacklebolt standing in the doorway. His eyes immediately fell upon Draco. "From what I understand, Mr. Malfoy does not need a wand to defend himself, and Ms. Granger is more than

capable of holding her own."

"That was quick," said Ernie, taking Padma's hand since she looked extremely nervous. She was not used to breaking the rules and clearly feared punishment. "I thought for sure we would be stuck in here for at least a day."

"No, Mr. Macmillan, I was actually quite close when I received Minerva's message regarding our 'guests'."

Hermione frowned. "I really wish you would all stop referring to us like that."

Kingsley moved his eyes to her and stared her down for a moment. Hermione gulped away her fears and stood up straight, giving him a strong and defiant look in return. After a moment of this, Kingsley broke and smiled.

"Just the same as I remember you, Ms. Granger. Well, come along everyone," he said, heading back into the office. "We have much to discuss."

Kingsley and Minerva each took seats behind their desks, transfiguring extra chairs so that everyone could fit, including a rather large one for Hagrid. When Hermione and Draco got into the room, the remaining two chairs were not next to each other. Draco immediately held out his hand and summoned the one next to Terry, gladly pushing Harry to the side so that he could squeeze his chair in next to Hermione's. Try as they might, he was not going to let them separate the two of them, even if it was just for a moment.

"Impressive," said Kingsley, even though he was looking down at a piece of parchment on his desk. McGonagall's notes.

The room was silent while Kingsley read, aside from an old grandfather clock ticking away. Draco tried to focus on that while they waited. Several minutes passed and he eventually felt Hermione's sweaty palm enter his. She was shaking and he gave her hand a squeeze to calm her.

"What was your path after your escape?" asked Kingsley, finally looking up from his parchment and staring at Hermione.

She cleared her throat. "Once we reached Apparating range outside of London, I brought us to Godric's Hollow since Draco had an encounter with the resistance there in December. I knew it was a longshot, but I did not have much time to think of where else we might go. The ghost, Wendy, helped us enter your base there and we hid out for several days while Draco recuperated. Then we went to Hogsmeade using Polyjuice Potion and forged identification papers. We stayed at

the Three Broomsticks in hopes of hearing rumors of where the resistance might be located, since we were told previously you were hiding out in a forest in the area -"

"Told? By whom?" asked McGonagall.

"I am afraid I cannot reveal that information," said Hermione. "But we received some assistance escaping the city and they were the ones to give us this tip before we left. But, in Hogsmeade, the only rumors we heard were about the Death Eater who escaped London with a Mudblood."

Several people cringed at Hermione's casual use of the word, but she continued without pause.

"The next day, we setup camp in the mountains and were there until Ginny, Ernie, Dean and Terry abducted us. And, now, here we are."

"Abducted sounds so cruel," said Ernie with a frown. "I'd like to think we liberated you."

"Liberated?" repeated Draco as he furrowed his brow. "I was stunned, bound and thrown into a locked room with *no* mattress. 'Abducted' stands."

"I got a mattress," said Hermione with a small smile.

Draco narrowed his eyes at her. "Bloody favoritism."

"Mr. Shacklebolt, if I may," said Ernie, raising his hand.

Kingsley motioned for him to continue.

"As you can see in those notes you've been reading over, Malfoy here saved me last year when I was captured, only hours before I was scheduled to be executed. While he may be lacking in charm, he is not the evil Death Eater everyone makes him out to be, and I think it would be cruel, not to mention hypocritical, of us to throw him out when all of this time we've been fighting for equality. Just because he has a tattoo on his arm does not make him any less of a person than the rest of us."

"Well said, Baby." Padma smiled and rubbed his knee. Ernie blushed and smiled back.

"You can relax, Mr. Macmillan. We will not be kicking anyone out of here today."

A giant knot Draco had not even been aware of suddenly released in his stomach. Hermione whimpered beside him and brought her hand up to muffle the sounds. "Really?" she asked with tears in her eyes. "Do you …" she gulped. "Do you mean that, Sir?"

"I assure you, Ms. Granger, I am very sincere," said Kingsley, moving his eyes to Draco. "Several years ago, Andromeda Tonks came to me. She told me she had run into her nephew at the Black Market and that he seemed like a genuinely changed wizard. She asked for permission to continue contact with him and eventually started passing on information he gave her. Not once have you steered us wrong, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco gulped. "My aunt told you about me?"

"Yes," said Kingsley. "I hope you are not angry with her, but she knew we would be unable to use the information you gave her without telling me all about who was providing it. She even contacted me the moment she learned of your escape from London, and I have been spending the last few days searching for you."

"That's where you were?" asked Harry, looking confused and slightly betrayed. Probably because he had not been trusted enough with this information on Malfoy. But, judging by the look on McGonagall's face, he was not the only one.

"It was," said Kingsley. "And it seems I'm not the only one who has been looking for you. Antonin Dolohov, Stuart Parkinson and Quincy Nott have been leading several groups of Death Eaters and Snatchers all around the country. It has never been more dangerous out there, and sending you back out might as well be your execution."

"I don't get it," said Ron, who was leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed. "I understand you were You-Know-Who's favorite and all, but why is he wasting so much energy on this? Death Eaters have run from him before. He always captures them but it's not like he sends out bloody search parties or anything. He just waits for them to make a mistake."

"I'm not just his favorite, *Weasel*," spat Draco. "Just after your little kidnapping attempt, when I suffered my torture, he spoke with me alone and told me he believed in my loyalty. He planned on making me an equal with Bellatrix, offering to share his secrets with me."

"Secrets," repeated Harry. "What secrets?"

"How should I know?" said Draco. "He was going to discuss it with me more once I

healed, but, obviously, we had to flee before that ever happened." He paused and took a deep breath. "The point is he trusted me, and I made him look like a fool by betraying him. That's why he's putting in all of this energy to find me."

Hermione squeezed his hand tighter. Even with the relief of knowing they would not be sent back to the streets, her stomach was still churning. She knew Voldemort would never give up on Draco until one of them was dead, and with Harry's current condition it looked like they might be in hiding for a long time.

"All the more reason for us not to let him have you," said Kingsley. "That is, if you don't mind us using your name for a bit of blackmail, if necessary."

"By all means," said Draco. "I am sure my father is trying to convince the Dark Lord that Granger Imperiused me, so if you could just run with that, it would be preferred. If, by chance, I ever am captured."

Hermione tensed beside him. "You won't be, Draco."

"Better safe than sorry. A good way of thinking, Mr. Malfoy," said Kingsley. He grabbed a blank piece of parchment and a quill. "All right then. Now that it is official the two of you will be staying, it is time for the arrangements. Ms. Weasley - "

Ginny sat up straight.

"- you will give Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Granger a tour of the facility. While that is occurring, we will gather every last person in the dining hall and inform them of this arrangement. It is important we emphasize that Mr. Malfoy is not to be harmed." Kingsley looked up at Draco and Hermione. "Also, I am afraid we will be unable to return your wands, so that the others will be able to maintain a sense of security."

"That's fair," said Hermione, even though she hated the idea of not having her wand. She went four years without one, and these last few days had been more torturous than she had expected. But Draco's safety was the most important thing, and she would suffer whatever was necessary to make sure he was.

"Of course, it also would have helped if Mr. Malfoy had not demonstrated his ability to use wandless magic," said McGonagall, gazing at him through her squared-spectacles.

Draco smirked and shrugged. "That one guy was being a prick, using a Jelly-Legs Jinx on his own comrade simply because he stood up for his girlfriend."

Ernie and Padma both beamed at him.

"He got what he deserved. And I didn't *use* his wand. I gave it to Granger."

Hermione smiled. "I would have gladly done more than stun Cormac. He had no right starting a riot like that when all Draco wanted to do was help."

Of course, she realized the only reason Draco helped Seamus was to save Theo's conscience, which turned out to not even be necessary. For obvious reasons, she did not voice this aloud.

"Macmillan, Patil, Thomas, Boot," called Kingsley, causing each one of them to rise and stand at attention.

"Oooooh! Dean *Thomas*! Now I remember!" exclaimed Draco. "But, Terry Boot, I'm afraid you still escape me."

Terry sneered at him.

"The four of you will go around and tell everyone to gather in the dining hall," continued Kingsley, writing something down on his parchment. "Calm down who you can and, for Merlin's sake, tell them all to *relax*."

They all nodded. Ernie, Padma and Terry headed for the door, but Dean took a moment to walk up to Draco. Without looking at him, he said, "Thanks. For saving my mate."

Draco gave him a curt nod. Dean nodded back before following the others out.

"Excuse me, Kingsley," said Ginny, suddenly raising her hand. For a while, her nose had been stuck in that notebook of hers. "I've just been checking our current room assignments and the only one big enough to accommodate both of them is presently resided in by Cormac. This might be a problem, considering how hotheaded he is."

"I will speak to Mr. McLaggen personally," said Kingsley, "letting him know that this sort of behavior will not be permitted around here." He scribbled something more on his parchment. "Minerva, perhaps you and Hagrid could go and prepare Mr. Malfoy's and Ms. Granger's new quarters for them."

"Yes, we will gather everything they need," said McGonagall as she stood.

"Ms. Weasley, what room will they be in?"

"The Red Room," answered Ginny.

McGonagall nodded and headed for the door. She waited while Hagrid stood up from his seat. He looked at Hermione one last time and wiped at his wet eyes before following her out.

"Arthur, perhaps you, your son and Mr. Potter should head to the dining hall now," said Kingsley. "Your voices are all highly respected around here and might be able to put a stop to whatever ridiculous rumors are surfacing out there."

"Yes, of course," said Arthur. He and Ron stood while Ginny turned towards Harry and cast her spell on his legs. After wiggling them a bit, he stood too and followed Arthur out of the room. Both he and Ron looked at Draco skeptically as they passed him. He just smiled in response.

"Ms. Weasley, I would like you to show them where they will be staying as soon as you are finished with your tour."

Ginny nodded very seriously.

"Give it some time but, eventually, I am going to want you to bring them to the dining hall. They will be eating dinner along with everyone else tonight."

Hermione gulped while Draco went stiff.

"I know this might seem quick, but if we want everyone to accept you as an equal, Mr. Malfoy, we cannot be showing you special treatment."

Draco somehow managed a nod, though he was pretty certain this was a horrible idea.

"Ms. Weasley, could you please take Ms. Granger into the hall? I would like to speak with Mr. Malfoy alone for a moment."

Ginny stood up right away but Hermione looked nervously at Draco.

"It's all right," he said, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be along in a moment."

Hermione nodded slowly before kissing his cheek and following Ginny out the door, holding onto his hand until the last possible moment.

Once they were alone, Kingsley said, "I hope you realize I am going out on a limb for you."

"I do," said Draco, "and I appreciate it."

"Honestly, I am a little surprised that you want to stay here."

"I don't," Draco said honestly. "But, if you kick me out, Granger insists on coming with me, and, while my execution is imminent, hers is not. During our escape, the Dark Lord offered to spare her if I returned, and I would have done it if she had let me."

Kingsley could not hide the smile tugging at his lips. "And another thing."

Draco looked at him expectantly.

"You might want to try refraining from referring to You-Know-Who as the 'Dark Lord' while you are here. I cannot imagine people will be too keen on that sort of talk."

The corner of Draco's mouth twitched upwards. "Habit."

"I assume you won't have any problem sharing valuable information with us when needed. Maps of facilities, guard schedules …"

"Ask and it's yours," said Draco. "Though, I'm sure they'll be changing a few things now that I'm gone."

"Not if they don't know you're with us," said Kingsley.

Draco cocked an eyebrow.

"As soon as we learned about the taboo on Ms. Granger's name, we sent several platoons all around the country to use her name and lure Snatchers and Death Eaters into traps. We've gotten a few but they're starting to catch on. After having them test out a few nicknames for her, as requested by Mr. Potter, I am going to have one of my best platoons go around, pretending to be you. Obviously, we will need some hairs for Polyjuice Potion from you and Ms. Granger."

Draco nodded. "If you just got here then how do you know of an idea of Potter's?" he asked.

"Minerva takes very detailed notes," said Kingsley, holding up the piece of parchment with her neat handwriting on it. "There is just one last thing, Mr. Malfoy. The real reason I wanted to speak with you alone."

Draco took a deep breath and held back his nerves. He waited.

"If a time comes when You-Know-Who finds out you are here, and he is willing to

make a bargain we cannot refuse …"

Draco fidgeted nervously and looked down to the floor. "You want me to give you permission to use me as a sacrifice."

"Something like that," said Kingsley with a frown.

"I suppose I can't deny you something you can easily take with force," said Draco, clenching his teeth. "But, I should warn you that he keeps no prisoners."

"Not presently, but if he suspects we have you -"

"You have my permission," said Draco, standing up and refusing to look Kingsley in the eye. "But, if it comes to that, I am entrusting you not to let Granger follow me. Lock her up if you have to, just don't let her try to play the hero."

"I will do what is necessary," said Kingsley. "Now, if I could just have your signature verifying this agreement."

He turned the piece of parchment he had been writing on so it was facing Draco, who picked it up and looked it over. It was a contract. Draco gulped.

"Is it charmed?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Kingsley. "So you will have no choice but to comply."

Draco nodded. He picked up a quill and quickly signed the parchment. "Are we done?"

"I believe we are," said Kingsley, standing up and leading Draco towards the door. When they got into the hallway, Hermione and Ginny were standing close by and seemed to not be uttering a word. Hermione hurried over to Draco and took his hand again.

"Give me an hour, Ms. Weasley. Then bring them right in."

Ginny looked almost as nervous as Draco and Hermione but, still, she nodded.

"I suppose I should be off then," said Kingsley. "Wish me luck." He gave them all a smile before walking down the east corridor.

"What did he want?" Hermione asked as soon as he was out of earshot.

"Nothing really," said Draco. "Just asked if I'd be willing to share information and

recommended I keep the 'Dark Lord' talk to a minimum. Perhaps I should practice this 'You-Know-Who' business." He smirked.

"Or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," suggested Ginny.

Draco scrunched his face. "Too much of a bloody mouthful. You-Know-Who will have to do."

Draco repeated the name to himself over and over again as Ginny led them down the opposite direction as Kingsley. Hermione stayed a step behind him and watched him closely, knowing he was not being completely honest with her. As much as he tried to hide it, he was far less confident than he was before, and she hated to think of just what Kingsley might have said to make him lose that. Whatever it was could definitely not be good.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

"Feel any better?" Pansy hung her head over the side of Theo's bed and gazed at him upside-down.

He grimaced down at her. "Your potions always taste like shit," he said, picking up a bottle of firewhiskey and taking a swig.

"*You're welcome*," she scoffed, taking the bottle from him and turning onto her stomach so she would not drown herself. "The Dark Lord would turn me into his own personal stress ball if he knew I was sneaking it to you."

"Oh, you mean like he's been doing with me?"

Pansy frowned. Even though Voldemort had released Theo and let him heal - to an extent - he still tortured him at least twice a day. To relieve some of that stress he had been building up ever since Draco's escape. He had to take it out on someone and Theo was an easy target, considering his involvement with it all. Imperiused or not, the Dark Lord was not forgiving.

Suddenly, the door opened and Theo's father barged in.

"Ever heard of fucking knocking?" spat Theo. "What if Pansy and I were in the middle of a shag?"

Pansy chuckled as she took a swig of the firewhiskey.

"From what I hear, it would not be that difficult to get her into one."

Pansy's jaw dropped slightly.

"Don't you fucking be rude to my guest!" shouted Theo, his fists clenching.

"It's fine, Theo," said Pansy, staring coldly at the old man. "At least I don't need to *force* people to shag me, unlike some other prick in this room."

Pansy took another swig from the bottle to keep herself together. She was not sure where these rumors about her started. She had only been with three men ever. Four if you counted Theo, but she preferred to forget *that* embarrassing fiasco.

The night her father told her she had to become a Death Eater, she went out and got pissed with Draco and Theo. Draco disappeared early on, probably to shag some slag, but Theo and she drank until the wee hours of the night. Then they went back to her place and had what could definitely be noted as the most awkward shag of her life. If she had a brother and just happened to shag him, she imagined it would have felt something like her encounter with Theo.

Of course, neither of them had told anyone about that. Especially Draco. While he may not have had romantic feelings towards her anymore - if ever - he still had this possessive claim over just about any witch he had shagged more than once. And, if he was like that with her, Pansy could only imagine how he was with Granger. She smiled to herself as she started thinking about the two of them finding the resistance and running into Ron Weasley. Oh, she would pay so many Galleons to see that one play out.

And then Pansy's mind drifted to the last time she and Draco had shagged. While it had been before the date he and Granger claimed they got together, the owl she had received the next day said that at least feelings had been involved at that point.

And then it hit her.

When Draco gave her the best shag of her life, had he been thinking of bloody *Granger*?

"Why the fuck are you making that face?"

Pansy slowly turned her head towards Theo. "What face?"

"That one," he said, pointing. "You look fucking repulsed or something."

"It's nothing," said Pansy. "Just …" She gulped and patted her throat. "Firewhiskey

went down the wrong tube."

Theo grabbed the bottle from her and chugged a good third of it down. "What do you want, *Father*?"

Quincy sneered at his son. "You have another guest. One much more appropriate for a Nott to be associating with than your current one."

Pansy's lip curled. "I'm sorry, but when exactly did the Parkinsons become lesser in your eyes?"

"The Parkinsons have always been 'lesser' than the Notts," said Quincy. "But anyone who has been tainted by that prick, Malfoy, is nothing but a piece of trash to me."

"So … this is all because I dated Draco five years ago?"

"Who's the guest?" asked Theo, eager to get his father and Pansy away from each other as quickly as possible.

"Astoria Greengrass," answered Quincy.

Both Theo and Pansy made faces.

"She would like to take you to dinner and I have already accepted the invitation."

"Then you better go and un-accept it," spat Theo. "Pansy and I already have plans to consume a liquid dinner."

"Cheers to that!" said Pansy, grabbing the bottle back and holding it up in salute before taking a sip.

"You're *going*, Theo," Quincy said sternly. "All of this sulking you have been doing over the past week does not sit well with the Dark Lord, especially when you spend all of your time with the witch who just happened to guess you were on the Imperius Curse."

"I didn't guess, I hoped," said Pansy with a sneer. "One would think his father would throw the suggestion out first. You're such a prick."

"And *you* are a filthy whore!" shouted Quincy, pulling out his wand.

Before he could do anything with it, Theo had his own wand out and aimed. "Stand down, Father!"

"Put your wand down, Theo. You know if you do anything, he's just going to spin it to the Dark Lord like *he's* the victim. And then you'll be tortured again and all that bullshit. It's not worth it." Pansy put the bottle down on his nightstand and climbed off the bed. "Just go to dinner with the little twat and meet me at my place after."

Pansy located her shoes and slipped them on. While Astoria may have been her best friend's little sister, she had never particularly cared for the girl, and the feeling was mutual. She kept an eye on her because Daphne had asked her to, but there was absolutely no emotional attachment.

Theo put on his own shoes and followed Pansy out of the room, making sure to shove hard into his father as he passed him. Astoria was standing in the center of the drawing room when they entered it, her face falling the moment she saw Pansy.

"Astoria," said Pansy with a civil nod. She walked right past her and to the front closet. She grabbed her cloak and put it on. Without another word, she walked out the front door.

"Hello, Theo," Astoria said brightly as her gaze fell upon him. "I hope I'm not intruding."

Theo shrugged. "It was just bloody Pansy."

"Did your father tell you -?"

"Yeah, yeah, let's get this bloody over with," said Theo, walking over to the same closet as Pansy and putting on his own cloak. "Are we Flooing?"

Astoria blinked. "I … thought we could walk," she said.

Theo groaned. "Fucking fine." He opened the front door and waited for her to go through.

Astoria sighed before walking out. Theo followed and shut the door behind him.

As they walked down the street, Theo always made sure to stay a step behind her. After a few blocks, he perked up his ears and instantly knew they were being followed by his father. Of course, Astoria seemed completely oblivious.

But what Theo could not figure out was *why* his father was following them.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Astoria, stopping in front of a crowded Italian restaurant.

Theo had been here several times before with his usual slags to keep them happy, and he could not help but crinkle his nose as he realized what Astoria was trying to do.

"Why here?" he asked, pulling back as she tugged on his arm and attempted to pull him inside.

"Well, I haven't eaten out much since I moved to this city and I've heard this place is the best," she said. "Besides, don't you like it?"

Theo cocked an eyebrow. "Who told you that?"

"Your father," she answered.

Theo groaned. "Fine then." Game on.

He let Astoria pull him inside. The hostess looked up as they entered, her eyes widening with recognition. "Oh, hi!" she said, looking at Theo. "Are you here to see Bronson again?"

Theo crinkled his forehead. "Excuse -?"

"Well, *hello*," said another hostess, walking up and leaning on the podium. "I remember you. Bronson and Zander's Death Eater friend, right?" She leaned forward, purposely showing off her cleavage. Theo kept his eyes up, but that did not stop Astoria from grabbing tightly onto his arm.

"Table for *two* please," she said.

"Theo!" A waiter suddenly walked over and put his arm around the hostess, pulling her back and away from him. "Where the hell you been, mate? Malfoy hasn't been home in over a bloody week. Should Bronson and I be worried?"

Theo said nothing, but Astoria crinkled her brow and asked, "Are you Draco's neighbor?"

"I am," said the waiter with a smile. He held out his hand. "Zander Quigley. Pleasure to meet you."

Astoria shook it, blushing a little as he gave hers a kiss.

"Ah, no way!" exclaimed the hostess who had just been flirting with Theo a moment ago, grabbing Astoria's arm. "You're a Death Eater *too*? I've never met a female one before!"

"Don't grab the customers, Jenna!" snapped the other hostess.

Astoria grabbed her arm back and pulled down her sleeve. "Umm … a table?"

The more professional hostess shook her head at her coworker and sighed before looking down at her chart. "Did you want them in your section, Zander?"

"Nah, I'm on my break," said Quigley. Then a light triggered. "But you should put them in Warren's section. He knows Theo too and I'm sure he would just be delighted to see him!"

"I don't know who the fuck that is," said Theo.

The hostess marked something on her chart and grabbed two menus. "Follow me," she said, walking into the dining room.

"But other people are waiting," said Astoria, looking around as they followed her.

"Death Eaters get privileges, Greengrass," said Theo. "Start getting used to it."

Astoria looked at him and frowned. "Call me Astoria."

Theo grunted. "Fine."

Hearing some whispering, Theo turned just in time to see the hostess, Jenna, mouth the words, "Is he the one?" to Quigley. He nodded and the two giggled before running off towards the kitchen.

"Here we are," said the hostess, motioning to their table. They sat down and she handed them their menus. "Enjoy."

When she was gone, Theo looked at the door to the kitchen. Quigley poked his head out and laughed again before looking back at someone and saying something.

"Do you remember him?" asked Astoria.

Theo looked back at her and said, "No."

"And this 'Warren' fellow. Nothing?"

Theo shook his head and grabbed the wine menu. That was all *he* cared about.

"Good evening!" said a waiter coming up to them. "My name is Warren and I will be your serv -"

Suddenly, Warren's eyes stopped on Theo, who was more than happy to meet his gaze. "Th'fuck you looking at?"

Astoria's eyes darted between the two. She had a pretty good feeling by the look on Warren's face that the two were not friends.

"*You*," he said accusingly.

"*Me*," said Theo before looking back at his wine menu. "Do I bloody know you or something?"

Warren's eyes widened. "You little prick. You filthy. Little. Man-stealing. Prick!"

Astoria raised her eyebrows. "Man-stealing?"

Theo looked up again just in time to see Warren grab a plateful of pasta off of a passing waiter's tray and dump it in his lap.

"Th'fuck!" he yelled, jumping to his feet. That shit was bloody hot. The entire restaurant turned in their direction.

"Warren, what are you doing?" shouted the hostess as she ran over.

"I am *not* serving him, Farrah! Kick him out!"

Farrah went white. "We can't kick him out! He's a Death -"

"KICK HIM OUT!"

"What is the meaning of this?" asked an older, authoritative-looking man who must have been the manager as he rushed over. His eyes widened as he looked at Theo. "Sir, I am so sorry! I don't know what came over him! Warren, apologize to our guest!"

"No," Warren said sternly.

"Warren, he's a Death Eater," said Farrah in a hushed tone.

"So?" he said. "What's he going to do? Execute me because I poured pasta on him?"

"I could if I wanted to, you bloody prick," spat Theo. "You're just lucky I'm not that spiteful."

Warren opened his mouth to say something but, before he could, someone

grabbed his shoulder. He turned to see Bronson smiling at him. "Warren, my friend. You look positively overworked. Perhaps it's time you head to the kitchen."

"No! You treated me like garbage and I *will not* -"

Bronson grabbed his collar and pulled him close. "This is neither the time nor the place you melodramatic piece of shit," he said through clenched teeth, all while keeping a smile on his face. "*Go* to the *kitchen*."

Bronson looked at Astoria, winked and said, "Good to see you again, Doll." Then he flashed one of his bright smiles at the patrons of the restaurant before dragging Warren away. When he passed a laughing Quigley, he grabbed his tie and pulled him along, as well.

"I am truly sorry about this," said the manager, who was still standing there. "Of course, your meal is on us."

"Whatever. Just bring us some bloody wine," said Theo. He looked at Astoria. "I'm going to go clean off this shit."

She nodded.

Theo hurried to the washroom and cleaned his lap off with a quick wave of his wand. Then he took a moment, splashing his face with water and rubbing at his temples. He always had horrible headaches, but ever since everything happened they had gotten so much worse.

Theo took several deep breaths as he looked at himself in the mirror. He was in deep shit. He knew he was. There was no way his father recommended this place to Astoria by mere coincidence. He was digging for something, and there was no doubt in Theo's mind that he had been out there somewhere watching the lovely show that just went on.

"*Shit*," he whispered to himself.

After a couple of minutes, Theo returned to the dining room where wine was waiting for him. Astoria was already halfway through her glass while Quigley leaned towards her, obviously flirting.

"Are you all right?" she asked as he sat down.

"Never better," said Theo, picking up his glass and taking a large sip.

"Unfortunately, Warren had to head home early," said Quigley with a smile.

"Feeling a bit under the weather, you know? But, no worries! I will be your waiter for the remainder of the evening! Anything you want is on us, so don't hesitate to order the entire menu if you would like. I will be back in a few minutes to take your order." He looked at Astoria and winked.

She smiled softly. Once he was gone, she asked, "Did you want to leave?"

Theo grunted. "No. It's fine."

"I'm really sorry, Theo," she said while tapping her finger against her wineglass. "I should have known better than to trust a recommendation from your father. Clearly, he is still convinced you haven't lost your memory."

Theo raised his eyebrows. He was impressed. "How observant of you."

"My original plan was just to go to the Leaky Cauldron or something and have a pint and some fish and chips. Parkinson could have come too."

Theo smirked. "What exactly are you playing at, Astoria?"

She looked at him and blushed. "What do you mean?"

"You fancy me or something?"

She blushed brighter. "No! I …" She sighed. "I had a crush on you in school, all right? But you were older and friends with my sister. Out of my league."

Theo crinkled his brow. Hmm. In school he had always been a bit of a loner, not to mention gangly. It was not until he became a Death Eater that women started paying any attention to him, so he had a hard time believing he was out of anyone's league.

"Didn't you want to marry Draco a couple of months ago?" he asked.

"Only because of my father," said Astoria with disdain. "He made it seem like he was my only option, when all he really wanted was the Malfoys fortune."

"If you're looking for a bloody husband then I'm definitely not -"

"I'm not!" she said quickly. "I've pretty much accepted I'm going to be a Death Eater for a long time. It's just …" She sighed. "Draco promised as long as he was in charge that he would take care of me, and now he's gone. I … I don't know anyone here, Theo. I don't trust my father anymore, Pansy hates me, Goyle is next to impossible to hold an intelligent conversation with, and you … well, if nothing else I

was really just hoping you would be my friend."

Theo kept his eyes on her as he took a long sip of his wine. When he set it down, he said, "You shouldn't want to be my friend, Astoria. Not now when I'm on the brink of execution."

"I don't care about that. And I don't care if you're lying or not about your memory. I'm sure I would."

"I also am never going to date you," he added. "I feel the need to make that very clear."

Astoria looked a bit sad, she nodded all the same.

"But I suppose I can always use someone new to drink with. I feel like that's all I bloody do with my other 'friends'."

Astoria smiled. "Really?"

"Yeah, sure, fine." Theo looked across the room and accidentally caught Quigley's eye. He immediately started heading over. "I'm going outside for some bloody air," he said, standing up. "Order me whatever."

Astoria nodded and Theo hurried out of the restaurant before he had to deal with bloody Quigley again. When he was outside, out of fear that his father might be watching him, he hurried into the closest alley. He really just wanted to be alone.

Theo leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, taking a moment to breathe before hearing a 'flick', followed by a familiar smell. He opened his eyes and turned his head to see Bronson smoking a Muggle cigarette.

"Out of all the alleys in this city, you wandered into mine." Bronson smirked. "Miss me, Theo?"

Theo said nothing.

Bronson chuckled and turned his head. "You really have no memory of me?"

Theo blinked. "No."

"But you *think* you met me once?"

He said nothing.

"I have a hard time believing you don't remember the night we met."

"I remember meeting you," said Theo, poking his head out of the alley and seeing if he could spot his father anywhere.

"Really?"

Theo turned back around and jumped when he saw Bronson was now right beside him. He held out his cigarette and offered him a drag. On instinct, Theo took it.

"Sorry about inside," said Bronson, taking out another cigarette and lighting it. "Quigley thought it would be funny."

Theo stared straight in front of him and took another drag of his cigarette.

"Are you not even curious *why* Warren acted that way?"

"I really don't give a shit," said Theo.

"Hmm … sounds about right," said Bronson with a smirk. "So about the night we met …"

"What about it -?"

Suddenly, Bronson moved in front of Theo, standing so close that he was practically pinned against the wall. His eyes widened.

"What are you -?"

"You really remember nothing?" said Bronson, his lips lingering just above Theo's as he ran his hand along his hips.

"No, I -"

"Nothing at all?" Bronson's hands began playing with the button on Theo's trousers.

Theo gulped. "No."

With a flick of his wrist, the button was undone.

"Okay, okay!" shouted Theo, shoving Bronson away from him. "I remember the night I bloody met you, all right? But I wasn't about to fucking admit that in front of my father."

"Then why lie now?" asked Bronson, taking a step towards him again.

"Because they're fucking watching me! They're fucking watching *you*! I don't know what your association with Draco was but being seen with me is only going to make it worse for both of us. Stay. Away."

Bronson smirked and took another step forward. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

Theo gulped again. "I … was fucking drunk of my arse that night."

"Yes," said Bronson, reaching out for his trousers again and unzipping them. "You've said that before."

Theo tried to pull away but Bronson held him firmly in place. Before he knew what was happening, his cock was out and Bronson was on his knees, sucking him off. Theo pressed his back firmly against the wall and bit his lip, trying to hold in his moans.

"There's nothing even vaguely familiar about this scene?" asked Bronson as he licked him from base to tip.

"N-no."

Bronson looked up at him and winked. He engulfed his whole mouth on him and began sucking hard, making Theo's knees go weak. Still, he managed to hold himself up.

It was only a matter of minutes before he was coming. Bronson zipped him up and stood back on his feet, immediately going in for Theo's lips. He held him firmly against the wall as he kissed him hard, massaging his tongue, sucking on his bottom lip … and Theo kissed back with just as much vigor. For a moment, anyway. Then his eyes shot open as the realization of what he was doing suddenly hit him.

"Get off me!" Theo shouted, shoving him away. Bronson could not help but smile at the cute way his cheeks flushed as he rubbed his lips on his sleeve. "If you know what's good for you then you'll stay the fuck away from me!"

Theo threw down the cigarette he was still holding and ran out of the alley.

Bronson stood there alone, putting his hands in his pockets as he smiled to himself. Progress.

"Holy fuck!"

Bronson's eyes widened. He turned around to see a familiar and very amused witch standing near the dumpster.

"I wasn't aware we had an audience," said Bronson, glaring at her. *Shit*. She was a Death Eater, he knew that, and quite possibly Malfoy's ex. If he remembered correctly.

"I admit I was a bit surprised when Draco and Granger said Theo was seeing someone. But this … My mind is literally fucking blown."

Bronson went white. "Granger …?"

"Don't play dumb with me," said the girl, taking several steps towards him. "I know you've been helping them. Fuck, I did too."

Bronson took a step back. He wanted to ask if she was the one who helped them escape the city, but he could not help feeling that this might be a trick.

"I'm Pansy," she said, holding out her hand.

Bronson did not take it.

She smirked and put it down. "No matter," she said. "You know, you really shouldn't mess with Theo like that. Not with his father watching his every bloody move."

Bronson cocked an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"His father followed him here," explained Pansy. "Set this whole bloody thing up to see if Theo is lying about losing his memory or not. He's just waiting for him to crack. I knew he was up to something so I decided to come along. You're lucky he's still inside because, if he saw what you just did, I don't think he would hesitate to kill you on the spot."

Bronson's bottom lip dropped slightly. "You think Theo is faking?"

Pansy shrugged. "I have no idea. I've been testing the waters for days now, but he's giving me no signs."

Bronson stared down at the ground and sighed. "I have to get back to work." He tried to move but Pansy stepped in front of him.

"Hold it," she said. "I've been wanting to talk to you ever since Draco and Granger left, and this is the first opportunity I've gotten. You're *going* to listen to me."

"Why should I -?"

"I helped them escape," said Pansy. "If you were wondering. And then I risked my own skin to make sure Theo wasn't bloody killed. If I had gone to the Dark Lord only minutes later then he would not be here now. You understand?"

Bronson tensed. He nodded slowly.

"All right then," she said. "I have a bit of a problem."

Bronson waited.

"Lucius Malfoy found out about me, and now he wants me to help him make sure Draco won't be executed once he is captured."

"How is that a prob -?"

"Because the only person he's concerned about is Draco. You, me, Theo, your flatmate, Granger … we're all expendable to him and, frankly, I don't want to die." She sighed. "If I'm going to work with him then I need a confidant. I'd been hoping it would be Theo, but I just don't think that's going to happen."

Bronson took a deep breath and said, "I'm not interested." He moved towards the door to the restaurant.

Pansy stepped in front of him again. "When the Dark Lord comes for you, you're going to want me on your side."

"You're the one who gave Granger those scars," said Bronson, suddenly recalling what Hermione had told him about this girl.

Pansy went white. "I removed them," she said in a shaky voice. "I was young. I -"

"Don't bother me again," said Bronson, knocking into her shoulder and finally reaching the door.

"If you care about Theo at all you'll stay away from him!" she called after him. "Another encounter like this and you just might succeed in getting him killed!"

Bronson closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I can't do that. He needs someone."

"That's why I'm fucking here!" shouted Pansy. "I'm not going to let his father hurt him."

Bronson opened the door.

"I'm going to get you to change your mind, you know!"

He stepped inside and shut the door.

Once he was gone, Pansy crossed her arms and sneered. Why did everyone have to make things so bloody complicated?

# Chapter 33: You Can't Do That

**A/N: Happy 4th of July to all of you Americans out there! Not our most cleverly named holiday, but I'm not about to complain when I don't have to work and will be spending my day drinking margaritas by a pool.**

**So I was really, really tired when I edited this chapter, so there is a chance it might not be up to my usual standard. If not, I apologize.**

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"So this is our courtyard of sorts," said Ginny as she led Draco and Hermione through an open entryway that took them outside. "There's no fence or anything but the shields extend all the way to the trees. And through that bunch of them over there," She pointed at a cluster of pines, "is another one of our training grounds." They had already seen the one indoors several minutes earlier.

While outside, all Draco could think about was how much he wanted a bloody cigarette. He inhaled deeply. Hermione glanced sideways at him and smirked. She knew what he was thinking.

Ginny led them back inside and continued down the corridor. "Along the edges here are our family rooms," she said, pointing at the doors. She tapped on one. "This one's mine."

"Don't you share a room with Harry?" asked Hermione.

Ginny laughed. "My dad would *never* allow such a thing. I sneak in there when I can, but I've always slept in one of the public rooms. But last year, when Bill died, I moved into this one with Fleur and their daughter, Victoire. We try to keep families together as best we can, but they're all occupied right now. Same with the couple rooms. We used to just give them to people but now we have to switch off monthly. Except for married couples. They always get one. We thought that would leave more rooms available, but all it ended up doing was encouraging people to tie the knot faster."

"People got married *just* for a private bedroom?" asked Hermione, looking appalled.

Ginny smirked. "In a place like this, people *really* value their privacy."

Draco chuckled. He could understand that. He was already analyzing each and every place they went to decide where would be easiest to sneak in a quick shag. So far, outside and a washroom stall were really the only options.

"And these are our showers and baths," said Ginny, opening a door and showing them several showers in a line covered with a blue curtain. There were bathtubs on either end of them.

Draco grinned. Jackpot.

"Of course, there are rules," explained Ginny, pointing to a list of them written on a board on the wall.

Number three: Only one occupant over the age of six per shower.

Draco's eyes continued downward.

Number five: Any hanky-panky is strictly prohibited.

His grin immediately faded.

"We tell the children that hanky-panky is the same as patty cake," said Ginny with a smirk. "This room is open twenty-four hours so you can come whenever. But until you're comfortable here, Malfoy, you might want to take them late at night when less people will be up and about."

While he understood she was referring to his safety, his mind immediately drifted to ignoring rule number three and five, and shagging Hermione in these showers while everyone else was in bed. In fact, he was pretty certain he was going to do that. Tonight preferably. And probably tomorrow. Most likely the next day too.

"So that's pretty much it," said Ginny. "Other than your room and the dining hall. I'm not sure what Kingsley's plan is for the two of you yet, but the rest of us divide up chores for the week. Every last person is assigned something. This week, I'm on kitchen duty."

Hermione nodded but Draco dreaded the thought of having to do 'chores'. When he moved into his flat and no longer had a house-elf to rely on, he had taught himself some cleaning spells, but with Bronson downstairs he never had to cook much, other than a few basic recipes. But this place … He was pretty certain his limited abilities would be of little use.

"I suppose I should show you to your room now."

Ginny led them back out of the shower room and down another corridor, stopping in front of a red door. She opened it and stepped aside so they could enter.

Draco and Hermione walked inside, both frowning as they saw two perfectly

straight lines of about twelve small, single beds. Fresh sheets and pillows were folded on top of the two closest to the door.

"Obviously, you can share," said Ginny, "but we're still required to give each person their own bed. And I think they might even be smaller than the medical ward beds so I don't know how comfortable you'll be."

"We'll manage," said Draco, not blind to her hints that perhaps they should not share.

"Are we not allowed to push them together?" asked Hermione.

Ginny shrugged. "We're not supposed to. Some people do at night and just wake up early to move them back, but with Cormac in your room, I wouldn't put it past the prick to rat on you. To keep things running smoothly, Kingsley and McGonagall came up with an abundance of rules, and they have a point system for it all. If you break the bed rule, that's four points. And once you reach a certain amount of points, there are consequences. Fifty is more chores, one-hundred takes away your outside privileges, and one-thousand is eviction." She gulped. "No one has ever reached one-thousand yet."

"How far along is that Cormac prick?" asked Draco.

"I'm not sure," said Ginny. "But he's had his outside privileges taken away several times."

"Maybe if he's close, he'll be wise enough to leave us alone," said Hermione. She walked over to their beds and immediately started making them. She did hers first while Draco went through all of the items that had been piled up for them on a small dresser - towels, toiletries, a shower cap, a few snack bars, parchment, quills, ink, etc. - and then she moved onto his.

"Are you not going to make your own bed, Malfoy?" asked Ginny as she watched Hermione closely.

Draco smirked. "What's the point? Whenever I do, she just remakes it for me right after. I've learned not to waste my time."

He turned and looked at Ginny. She blinked several times before eventually cracking a smile, and then laughing.

"That sounds about right. Whenever Granger stayed with us at the Burrow, she always did the exact same thing. She even did it a few times in my dorm. I finally had to tell her to leave my roommates' beds alone because they didn't like it."

"There's nothing wrong with being orderly," said Hermione, who was currently fluffing one of Draco's pillows. "If they had just listened to my advice on how to tuck the corners in properly then I wouldn't have had to bother."

Draco and Ginny looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

"I saw that," said Hermione, even though her back was to them.

Once she was finished, Ginny looked at her wristwatch and frowned. "It's been just about an hour. I suppose we should head to the dining hall now."

Draco and Hermione looked at each other. She gulped.

"Give us a moment, Weaselette," ordered Draco.

"Umm … all right," said Ginny, skeptically stepping out of the room and shutting the door behind her.

"Be honest, Granger. Which one of us are you concerned for right now?"

Hermione gulped again. "Both," she answered. "I don't want anyone to hurt you and I … I'm worried about how people will react to me."

"Not to mention the number of people who will be there."

Hermione went white. "Yes, that too. I …" Her hands began to shake. "I really hate this."

Draco stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. "I know," he said. "So do I. But, as much as I hate to admit it, this is the only place we're even remotely safe right now. We have to stay."

Hermione nodded against him. She pulled back a little so she could look into his eyes. Then she kissed him, eager to get that comfort only he could give her.

After a long, tender moment, they pulled away, but both kept their eyes closed, remaining close as they breathed each other in.

"Did you notice that invisible wall in McGonagall and Kingsley's office?" asked Hermione.

Draco smirked and pecked her lips. "Yes. Bloody voyeurs were watching us snog."

"That's really awkward. If I'd have known -"

"I would have used my influence to make you forget all about it."

Hermione chuckled. "Yes, you do love to make awkward situations downright unbearable."

"My specialty," said Draco, kissing her again.

Another moment of silence.

"Do you think everyone will hate me?"

Draco smirked and opened one eye. "What?"

"Well, there hasn't exactly been the most positive of reactions to my presence so far. And Harry and Ron -"

"Any lack of positive reaction from those two gits is aimed at me, Love. Not you."

Hermione sighed. "Maybe. But one would think if they were happy I was here then they would at least try to get along with you."

"Not Weasel," said Draco with a sneer. "He's still holding out fucking hope for you. Which is *why* you are never to be alone with him."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me? You know I would never -"

"It's not *you* I don't trust," said Draco. He reached up and stroked her cheek. "Please, Granger, just … give me this one."

Hermione sighed. "Fine. But you know I hate it when you order me around."

Draco leaned in and met her lips for an unresponsive kiss. "Don't be angry," he said, trying again. This time she gave in and kissed back. "At least Weaselette seems to be trying."

With a grunt, Hermione said, "I suppose."

Draco smirked. "What does that mean?"

She sighed again. "It's just … I'm not speaking ill of her in any way, because Ginny was a good student. She always did her homework and she didn't need me to twist her arm like Harry and Ron did, but with her notebook and lists and charts, she just seems so …"

"Like you?"

Hermione frowned. "Something like that. I just can't help getting the feeling that I've been replaced."

Draco laughed. When her frown deepened, he tightened his hold on her and kissed her cheek. "Sorry, Love, but even you have to realize how ridiculous you sound. I don't think Weaselette has any interest in replacing you. It's just hero worship." He lifted one hand and stroked the corner of her lips until they started to curve upwards. "And Potter and Weasel are her boyfriend and brother. They've always been close with her, haven't they?"

"Well … yes. Yes, they have."

"You haven't been replaced, Granger," said Draco, brushing his lips against hers. "Just give them time."

Hermione smiled softly and kissed him. "It might take less time if you stopped being such an arse to everyone."

Draco gasped, pretending to be offended. "What are you talking about? I've been positively delightful!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. Then she glanced at the door. "I suppose we should go and get this over with." She took a deep breath. "Are you ready?"

"I suppose I have to be," said Draco, removing his hands from her waist and taking her hand.

Hermione took another deep breath before stepping forward and opening the door. Ginny was standing just across from it, leaning against the wall. She looked up at them and stood up straight. "Ready?"

Hermione nodded. Ginny started walking. Draco moved to follow, but he had to tug on Hermione's hand a bit to get her to move with him.

As it turned out, the dining hall was only a few turns away. Ginny stopped before the door and turned around to look at them. "Since I have kitchen duty, I have to head straight in there and help out. I *should* have been there hours ago, but I guess I got a bit of a pass today. I think Kingsley just expects you to go in and find a seat." She turned her head and looked worriedly at the door. "It should be fine."

Draco noticed Hermione's hand was shaking in his. He gave it a squeeze. "Head up high, Love. Stay confident."

She nodded and took several deep breaths.

"Are you ready then?" asked Ginny.

Hermione did not move, so Draco said, "Just open the door, Weaselette."

Ginny turned, put her hand on the door and slowly nudged it open. Their ears were instantly flooded with a million voices talking in loud chaos, but the moment Ginny walked through, all sound halted.

She stood protectively in front of the door for a moment before Kingsley called, "I believe you are needed in the kitchen, Ms. Weasley."

Ginny sighed and nodded. She looked back at Draco and Hermione and mouthed the words, "Good luck," to them before walking off towards a door in the back of the room.

Draco confidently walked through the door, pulling Hermione along with him. They stopped as they entered. The entire room was completely packed and a couple hundred sets of eyes were aimed right at them.

Draco noticed the Weasleys were all sitting at a packed table with Kingsley, McGonagall, Hagrid and Harry. The one who had tried to abduct him in London attempted to jump up, but the dark-skinned girl he had been with that day grabbed his shoulder and stopped him. It was clear that someone must have given orders not to bombard them, whether it be friendly or hostile. He was unsure which this Weasley was preparing for.

"OI! We got space over here!"

Draco looked over to see Ernie standing up and waving his arms at them from across the room. Padma smiled happily beside him and beckoned them over.

It took a lot for Draco to stifle a groan while looking at them. He got that he had saved Ernie's life and all, but he simply did not understand why these people wanted to be his friend. Unfortunately, with all of the glares they were getting, there were few other table options that seemed like they would provide even a remotely pleasant eating experience.

Glancing sideways at Hermione, Draco watched as she lifted her eyes from the floor for the first time. She stood up straight, set her eyes on Ernie's table and took a confident step forward. Her grip on Draco's hand tightened with each step she took, trying to ignore the looks of disgust as they passed people.

"Hello Ernie. Padma," said Hermione as she took a seat on the bench. "Thank you for sharing your table. We really appreciate it."

Looking around the table, Hermione noticed several other familiar faces. Dean and Terry were here too, along with Luna, who was smiling as pleasantly as ever, Michael Corner, Lavender Brown, Justin Finch-Fletchley and Susan Bones.

"Well, this is very DA reminiscent," she said. "How is everyone?"

They all began looking around at each other. Except Luna. She just continued to smile and said, "Oh, we're all just lovely. Though, my stomach's a bit hungry since we're eating late today. We had a really long meeting just now."

Draco smirked. "Yeah, I'll bet."

"How are you doing?" asked Luna, still looking at Hermione.

"Luna!" snapped Lavender beside her. "We're not supposed to ask that," she muttered under her breath.

"You're not supposed to ask how I am?" said Hermione. "Well, I don't know what this meeting entailed or what rules you were given, but I'm doing splendidly." She folded her hands in front of her, sat up straight, and held her head up high. "We have the evilest wizard to ever exist trying to capture us, Draco was pretty much attacked for saving Seamus's life, we've been locked in a room for the past three days, and everyone in this hall keeps looking at us like we're bloody You-Know-Who himself. *Stop* looking at us like that, Lavender."

Lavender looked down at the table and whimpered. "I'm sorry."

Hermione sighed and tried hard to ignore every other set of eyes on her. "It's all right. If it's any consolation, I'm really glad to see all of you here." She gulped. "Alive."

"And everyone is really glad to see you too," said Padma, reaching over Ernie to pat Hermione's shoulder and looking sternly at everyone at the table. They all grunted their agreements.

"So you're really defected, Malfoy?" asked Justin, cocking his head and leaning across the table towards Draco, inspecting every inch of him.

Draco leaned back and raised his eyebrows. "If I said no, what would you do? Kill me right here?" He smirked.

Justin's eyes widened as he grew terribly white.

"Draco!" Hermione snapped.

Draco chuckled. "Sorry, Love. Couldn't resist. Yes, yes. I'm defected. Though, I have to say, my bloody mark has been itching like crazy ever since we left." He lifted his sleeve and began scratching his tattoo. "The Dark Lord - Oh! Sorry … *You-Know-Who* must be trying to call me."

Everyone gasped.

Hermione grabbed his sleeve and yanked it back down. "You're insufferable."

"Yes, you've said that before," said Draco, leaning forward and giving her a kiss.

Hermione pulled back and rolled her eyes. "Can you quit it with the show now and just act like a *normal* person?"

"Only if you kiss me properly," he said.

"The whole room is watching us," Hermione said quietly.

"Yes, I know," said Draco. "That's why you should do it."

Hermione sighed and glanced around the table. Then she looked all around the room. Yes, she was right. All eyes on them.

Draco put his hand on her knee and gave it a rub. He was just about to turn back to the table and apologize when Hermione grabbed his cheeks and pulled him in for a tender kiss.

There were gasps and whispers all around, but Draco and Hermione ignored them, taking this moment to relish in each other. When they finally pulled away, Hermione stroked his cheek as she looked deeply into his eyes. "Now *behave*," she ordered.

Draco smirked and kissed her nose. "Whatever you say, Love." He turned back towards Justin and said, "I wasn't serious before. It doesn't itch." Actually, *this* was the lie. It itched like hell almost constantly. A continuous reminder that he was never far from Voldemort's mind.

Justin looked at Draco's covered arm. He blinked. "Can I see it again?"

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Really?"

"I've never seen the Dark Mark on someone before," said Justin, almost salivating at the thought.

Draco looked to Hermione for approval. She nodded and gave a slight roll of her eyes.

Draco pulled his sleeve up again and held out his arm. Everyone at the table leaned in, none closer than Justin. He crinkled his nose and touched it. When the snake wiggled, he screeched.

"It does that when someone who is not a Death Eater touches it," said Draco, pulling down his sleeve. "But the Dark Lor - *You-Know-Who* is not informed. It's just a side-effect."

"So Malfoy really saved you, Her -?" Susan stopped and gulped. "I'm sorry. What would you like us to call you?"

"Just Granger is fine," said Hermione. "And yes, he did." Before Draco could open his mouth to protest, she added, "Sort of. I escaped on my own, but, once I was out, it wasn't going so well. Draco found me by chance and took me in." She looked at him and smirked. "I actually didn't want to trust him, but I was sort of out of options."

Draco smirked back. "If you really believed I was going to let you wander off alone, then you had another thing coming. If you hadn't followed me then I was already planning on stunning you and dragging you back to my flat."

"Yes, because *kidnapping* me would really have helped me trust you."

Draco shrugged. "You were 'out of options', remember?"

"And you escaped in September?" asked Susan.

Hermione looked back at her and said, "Yes."

"*And* you two have been together since … when exactly?" said Lavender, asking the question that had been on everyone's mind.

"November," answered Hermione. "I know it's strange but -"

"It's not strange!" exclaimed Padma, looking around the table and getting everyone to agree with her. "He's your hero! It's romantic!"

Draco and Hermione looked at each other. They both burst into laughter.

"*Hero*?" said Hermione. "Hardly! Heroes are supposed to be gallant and charming. Draco's just an arse."

"And proud of it," he said with a smile. "I'm no hero, Patil, nor do I claim to be. I feel the need to make that very clear to everyone in this bloody place. I have done more bad than good and I refuse to pretend otherwise."

"But you helped Ernie, didn't you?" asked Justin.

Draco drew his eyes over to Justin. He vaguely remembered him from school. A Hufflepuff, of course. Several at this table were. Coincidentally, the ones who were looking at him with the least amount of hostility. Ernie … Justin … that Bones girl. The vacant looking blonde was not a Hufflepuff, but she might as well have been with her plushy personality. There was really no other way to describe it.

And Justin … he kept watching Draco with a wide-eyed innocence that he could not help but loathe. Honestly, were there no bloody Slytherins in this place?

A quick look around let Draco know that there were, but none from his year. The few he recognized were older, and one girl he was fairly certain was a year below him. But none of them had any interest in him. They had all chosen their side a long time ago, and clearly did not fear disownment from their families. In fact, many seemed to be here *with* their families.

Draco could not help but smirk at the image of his father in a place like this. It was definitely comedic. But then his fists began to clench as he remembered the reason he despised his father. He had raped Hermione. The girl he loved. Draco hated that he was given the perfect opportunity to avenge her, to take his father's life … and he had let it slip by. As much as he wanted to, when he father stood before him in his flat, he simply could not strike. Hermione would never hurt Lucius because she was unsure of what Draco wanted. He knew it would be up to him to finish the job. Next time, he would not fail.

"Draco." Hermione nudged his side. "Justin asked you a question."

Draco blinked a few times and regained focus. He looked back at Justin and said, "Yes, I saved him. He was not heavily guarded because The Dark - *You-Know-Who* knew no one would come for him. I knocked a few Death Eaters out, erased some memories and sent him on his merry way. Simple. But if I had felt the task would risk my exposure then I would not have done it."

"So you would have let Ernie die?" asked Lavender.

Draco moved his gaze to her and said, "With a guiltless conscience."

"Lucky for me then, eh?" joked Ernie, but no one laughed.

"That's cold," said Michael, speaking for the first time.

"It's reality," said Draco. "I have never created opportunities to save people, but, when they happened to present themselves, I took them."

Glancing around the table, Draco noticed as everyone avoided looking at him for a moment. Hermione grabbed his hand in his lap and held on tight. Then his eyes fell upon Luna. She met his gaze with her own dreamy one and smiled softly at him.

"I understand what you mean," she said to everyone's surprise. "Being a Death Eater must have been terribly frightening. Not many people would have been able to be as brave as you were."

"Brave?" repeated Michael, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, brave," said Luna, almost sternly - at least for her. "If caught, he would have suffered a death more painful than any of us could ever imagine. Yet, still, he did it. Saving Ernie and Granger so that they can be with us now!"

Hermione could not help but smile across the table at her. "I've missed your optimism, Luna." In their current world, especially, she really was just a breath of fresh air.

Luna moved her smile to Hermione. "Would you mind if I came over and hugged you now? We were never given the chance earlier with Cormac's little tantrum."

Ernie laughed. "Oh, was that what that was?"

"Of course you can hug me, Luna," answered Hermione.

Luna practically danced out of her seat and skipped over to Hermione, who swiveled so she was facing outward. Luna leaned down and hugged her tightly, both of their eyes tearing as she did so.

Over Luna's shoulder, Hermione could see Ron and Harry watching them. Both really looked like they wanted to come over, but a stern look from Kingsley let her know that they were being kept away on purpose. Probably so it would not seem like Draco and Hermione had bodyguards or something. It was really the only reasoning she could come up with.

Just then, the kitchen staff came into the dining hall floating several trays of food. While everyone was distracted, Cormac shot some sort of jinx at Draco. Noticing the movement, he waved his hand and blocked it. Everyone who witnessed this

gasped again.

"Mr. McLaggen!" shouted Kingsley. "What did I tell you?"

Cormac grunted and nodded in agreement, but the moment Kingsley looked away, he and everyone at his table laughed over it. Ginny walked by and flicked her wand, making Cormac sprout a pig's nose.

"Go be with your own kind, Cormac," she muttered.

"Bitch," he said under his breath.

Draco waved his hand under the table and made Cormac sprout a matching tail. His entire table laughed. The best part was that Cormac and everyone else at his table had absolutely no idea the laughter was at his expense.

"How did you learn so much wandless magic?" asked Justin.

"Self-taught," answered Draco. "I don't know enough to win me any battles but it works well when I need to get out of a bind."

"Literally," said Dean, recalling the night they had found Draco and Hermione, and the robes they just could not keep on him. "Don't worry about Cormac and his lackeys," Dean continued. "Me, Terry, Michael and Susan are all in the same room as you so we'll make sure he cooperates."

"Are you offering to be my bodyguards?" asked Draco with raised eyebrows.

All three boys scoffed and Susan giggled.

"I think you're fully capable of holding your own," said Terry. "But you saved Seamus, which makes Ernie's story much more plausible."

Ernie beamed at him.

"And I may feel slightly guilty for casting the curse that put your health over the edge," added Terry, though he did not appear especially guilt-ridden as one of the kitchen staff placed some trays on their table. He immediately grabbed a slice of bread and stuffed it in his mouth.

"And you brought Granger back," said Dean, putting some bread on his plate in a much more civilized manner than Terry. "Harry and Ron have been pretty much lost without her. Maybe now things with them might get back to normal again."

Hermione's face dropped.

"It's true," said Susan. "Harry's secluded himself from almost everyone and Ron's just angry all of the time."

Hermione glanced over at their table and caught Harry's eye. He tried to smile at her and she attempted the same. Merlin, she missed him. The old Harry. And she was sure he felt the same about her. It was a shame they were not those people anymore.

"So you're really all okay with Draco being here?" asked Hermione, turning back towards her table. "You're not angry a Death Eater has been let into your base?"

"No, not at all!" exclaimed Ernie.

"He can provide us with so much useful information," said Padma.

"The majority of Death Eaters suffer from a horrible disease called Pompous Pathosis and I am really glad that Draco has overcome that," explained Luna.

"Malfoy," Draco corrected her. "And I have overcome no such thing."

Michael grunted.

Justin smiled and said, "S'alright with me."

Dean and Terry each mumbled their own version of, "No, no, it's fine," and Susan and Lavender looked at each other, but neither protested … or agreed.

"Okay …" said Hermione, taking a deep breath. "But you've accepted it?"

This time, there were yeses all around and a very big thumbs-up from Ernie. Padma, of course, followed suit before giving her boyfriend an affectionate kiss.

"Everyone at this table already agreed before you got here that we'd cooperate with this," explained Dean. "You can thank Ernie's prodding for that."

"I'm pretty certain Malfoy and I are going to become best mates."

"And I'm pretty certain we are not," said Draco.

Hermione nudged his side hard with her elbow.

Draco groaned. "But we appreciate the support."

"We really do," insisted Hermione.

"Merlin, Baby, do you know what I just thought of?" asked Ernie.

Padma looked at him expectantly.

"The two of them could *totally* be our couple!"

Padma's eyes lit up. "Oh my gods, you're right! Oh, this is so exciting!" She clapped her hands and looked at Hermione. "We haven't had another couple to hang out with since Seamus and Lavender broke up last year!"

Both Draco and Hermione's eyes widened as they tried really hard to fight off the fear they felt. Hermione faked a smile, but Draco was far less successful.

Ernie and Padma burst into laughter. "Oh, relax, Malfoy. We're only joking. Right, Baby?"

"Uh … right!" shouted Ernie.

Draco looked across the table at Justin, who laughed and mouthed the words, "He's not joking."

Dinner went fairly smoothly. No one tried to curse Draco from across the room, which was good. But that did not stop everyone from constantly staring. Especially Harry and Ron. Pretty much every time Draco glanced in their direction, their eyes were on him and Hermione, but they always turned away before he could give them the sneer he wanted.

Towards the end of the meal, Luna surprised everyone by openly asking Draco if he, by chance, knew which Death Eater had killed her father. While he did not normally keep tabs on such things, the Lovegoods were sort of hard to miss and he remembered that Rabastan had been the one to do the very gruesome and painful deed. Of course, he did not share the details, but he did let her know that she would not have to worry about her father's murderer any longer. Rabastan was quite dead.

A little sad and teary after their conversation, Luna excused herself from dinner early and retreated to her room.

"Cormac, what is that on your bum?"

Everyone at Draco and Hermione's table turned to see some blonde girl pointing at the pig's tail they had forgotten all about. Their laughter returned as Cormac

struggled to look over his shoulder at it.

He yelped. "Who bloody did this?" His eyes instantly fell on Ginny, who was in the middle of serving dessert.

"Don't look at me," she said. "I admit to the snout, but the tail is not my handiwork." As Ginny walked past him, she grabbed the thing, pulled it straight and made a 'boing' noise as she let it go.

Cormac began looking frantically around the room, trying to figure out who else might have been the culprit while the girl who had spotted the tail attempted to remove it with her wand. His eyes then fell on Draco, who could not hide his joy in that moment.

"You caught me," he said. Then he looked across the room at Kingsley. "Do I lose points for this?"

Kingsley raised his eyebrows. "I see Ms. Weasley informed you of our system." He waved it off. "No, not this time, Mr. Malfoy. I will excuse a first offense."

"But he gave me a bloody tail!" shouted Cormac.

Several people around the room snickered.

"And *you* called my Mediwitch an obscene word." Draco looked at Ginny and winked. She blushed. "Misspeak to a lady again and I will gladly turn you into even more of the animal you so closely resemble."

"I think a donkey might be more appropriate," said Ginny. "So that everyone can see what an arse he really is."

The snickers became full-on laughter. After turning a bright shade of red, Cormac stormed out of the room without any dessert, his tail bouncing as the blonde girl chased after him with her wand still raised.

As soon as he was gone, Ginny looked at Draco. She smiled. "Draco Malfoy defending my honor? Creepy."

Hermione burst out laughing as Draco tensed in anger. "There's that *bloody* word again! My being nice is *not* creepy!"

Hermione laughed harder.

After dessert, Hermione sat in silence while she made a mental list of supplies she

would need from her bag, if Ginny did not give it back completely. Draco was still sitting next to her, trying to act disinterested as Ernie talked animatedly to him, but the other wizard simply was not taking the hint.

"Granger."

Hermione was torn out of her daze and looked up to see Fleur standing beside her. "Hi," she said nervously.

Fleur smiled, leaned forward and hugged her. "'Ello. Welcome back."

Hermione returned the hug. "Thank you."

"I zought you might want to come over to our table and meet my daughter, Victoire. And Charlie and George would really love to see you, but zey are too shy to come over 'ere."

"Since when are Charlie and George shy?" she asked.

Fleur glanced slyly at Draco.

Hermione frowned. "Oh." She turned to him. "Would you be all right if I went over there for a minute?"

Draco looked over to see that Ron was still sitting at the table. He grimaced but still said, "Yeah, fine." He leaned in close. "Just don't leave me alone with this …" His mind flooded with the millions of names he wanted to call Ernie, but the one that stumbled out was, "*Hufflepuff* for too long."

Hermione smirked. "*Really*, Draco? If that's the best insult you can come up with then I believe I will take my precious time." She kissed him on the cheek and stood up.

Draco watched closely as Hermione followed Fleur over to her table. George was the first out of his seat and scooped her into his arms, followed shortly by another redhead who must have been Charlie. Then the dark-skinned girl he remembered from the Gryffindor Quidditch team - not to mention his attempted abduction in London - stood and hugged her. Hermione took her left hand after and beamed at it. A wedding ring. Draco's mind instantly drifted back to what Ginny had said about people getting married just so they could have a private room. He wondered if she and whichever Weasley was her husband fell under that category.

Then Hermione was introduced to a small child who looked remarkably like her mother, only her hair was more strawberry-blonde. Hermione always seemed

happiest when in the presence of children, and Draco could not help but smile at the sight. He found himself wondering if the two of them would ever get the chance to have some of their own. The way things were going right now, it seemed unlikely. But he wanted to marry her one day. He wanted to have a family with her. And the two of them would never repeat the mistakes his parents had made. He was sure of it.

"Can I ask you something, Malfoy?"

Draco turned his head to find Padma watching him closely. "Go ahead," he said.

"I hope I'm not speaking out of place, but I've treated quite a few former slaves and I've just been wondering … you see, not only is Granger in better physical health than most but … but mental, as well. Has she ever … I mean, has there ever been a time when …?"

"As her Healer, it's not considered rude to ask such questions," said Draco. "You want to know if she's ever shown signs of mental instability."

Padma frowned. "Something like that."

"The answer is yes," said Draco. "She has episodes sometimes and her nightmares, but they're always triggered and they're not bad. I'm hoping now that we're here that you'll never have to see one."

"Could I view your memories sometime?" she asked. "I have been trying to study the effects of the Cruciatus Curse over time but it's not an easy task, and the more subjects I have the better."

Draco did not like that word. *Subject.* "You'll have to get her permission."

Padma nodded.

"Do you know Legilimency?" he asked.

"No," she answered, "But we have other methods for extracting memories."

"Oh, thank Merlin it's over!" A blonde girl looking slightly disheveled plopped down at the table across from Ernie. "I *hate* kitchen duty," she said, taking the remainder of his dessert and picking at it with a fork.

"Hey! I wasn't finished with that!" he exclaimed.

"My blood, sweat and tears went into making this cake, Ernie, and we ran out

before I even got a piece," she said with a smile.

Ernie crinkled his nose. "Gross."

Suddenly, the girl stopped mid-bite and looked across the table at Draco. She pulled her fork out and swallowed. "Hi."

"Malfoy, this is Hannah. Another former *Hufflepuff*," said Ernie with a wink. "She made the same agreement as the rest of us before Kingsley *forced* her back to the kitchens."

Hannah held out her hand. Draco looked at it skeptically for a moment before lifting his nervous one and shaking it. "Hannah Abbott?" he said quietly.

"Oh, so you remember *her* surname?" Dean shouted from the other side of the table.

Hannah looked surprised that Draco knew her name, quite oblivious to the real reason behind it. But it was because of Theo mentioning the old woman's Hufflepuff granddaughter that it even hit him.

Hannah smiled.

Draco felt sick. *Shit*. Where was Hermione? He looked over to see that she was still chatting with the Weasleys while holding the little girl, Victoire. From here, she looked almost normal.

Draco tried to catch her eye but she was too distracted.

*Shit.*

"I think it's really great that you've been helping us out all of this time," said Hannah. "It just goes to show you that -"

"Yeah, great," said Draco, hurrying out of his seat. "I have to go."

As he rushed out of the room, he heard Ernie say, "Where could he *possibly* have to go?"

Hermione noticed Draco leaving in a panic and quickly handed Victoire back to her mother. She apologized before running after him.

"Draco!" she called after him.

He did not hear her.

"Draco!"

He kept walking. Hermione could not figure out where he was going, but she doubted even he had a clue.

"Draco, stop!" She reached him and grabbed his arm, yanking him into a wall and holding him there. "What's wrong?" she asked, immediately noticing the tears in his eyes.

Draco sucked them up quickly. "I didn't know she was here."

"Who?"

Draco gulped. "Hannah Abbott. I … I didn't know."

The name struck Hermione and it suddenly felt like someone had kicked her in the stomach. "Oh." She looked around to make sure they were alone. The corridor was empty. She turned back to Draco, wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up into his eyes. "What happened with her grandmother was not your fault, Draco. She was dead the moment that … that wretched girl, Fiona, turned her in. You know she was."

"Yes, but -"

"You made it painless for her. It may not make it right, but you did what you could. If anyone should be blamed for her death then it's me for taking that knife. Not you. Understand."

"It wasn't your -"

"*Understand*?" she repeated, only much sharper this time.

Draco sighed and nodded.

Hermione leaned up and nuzzled against his cheek before giving it a kiss. "You are not a bad person, Draco Malfoy. Never forget that."

Draco wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, just holding her for a moment. He inhaled deeply, loving to breathe her in.

"How were you doing in there?" he asked into her hair.

Hermione tensed in his arms. "I tried," was all she said.

"You'll get there," he whispered before pulling back and giving her a kiss.

XXX

Later that night, Ginny sat on Hermione's bed while she went through her bag, pulling out any necessities. Kingsley had already retreated to his chambers before they were able to ask him if she could have it for good.

Hermione grabbed several clothing items for her and Draco. McGonagall and Hagrid had already left them toiletries, so there was no point in wasting theirs. She also grabbed another Sleeping Draught for Draco since Padma said he still needed bed rest.

"That looks comfortable," said Ginny as Hermione pulled out her robe.

"It is," she said, glancing at Draco and smiling. "Draco had our, uh, *friend* pick it up for me when we were in a fight."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I had wanted to get it for you even *before* we were in a fight, Granger, but I kept running into everyone just outside of the fucking store."

"What were you fighting about?" asked Ginny.

Hermione narrowed her eyes and quickly went back to her bag.

"Perhaps we should avoid opening old wounds, Weaselette," said Draco.

"Lights out in ten minutes!" said Dean as he walked past them, freshly changed into some comfortable looking pajamas.

Draco followed him with his eyes, eventually stopping on Cormac, who was hardcore snogging that blonde girl from earlier on his bed. Needless to say, their show was more than a little nauseating.

"Some people really lack a common sense of decency," said Ginny, crinkling her nose as she stared at the same disgusting sight.

"Draco, maybe you should go change instead of watching them," suggested Hermione.

"Gladly," said Draco, grabbing the pajamas she handed to him and going behind a curtain that was hung so everyone in the room could change in privacy.

When he came back out, Ginny was just heading out the door. She gave Hermione a hug, which was slowly starting to feel more natural. When Hermione turned back around, Draco was holding her clothes out for her.

"Thanks," she said before going behind the curtain with them.

Hermione changed quickly. Back in the room, Draco was standing at the foot of both beds, staring at them with his hand on his chin. "I think this one might be slightly larger," he said, pointing to the one on the left.

Hermione went and stood next to him. "I doubt it," she said.

"Two minutes until lights out!" called Dean.

Draco looked over to see that Cormac and his lady friend were now under the covers. He had little interest in finding out what they were doing under there.

"Do you two need me to put a Silencing Charm on your ears?" Susan offered from her bed, which was right next to theirs. "Cormac and Lucy aren't exactly quiet at night, if you know what I mean." She looked at another girl in the room and both gave exasperated looks.

"And it doesn't help that they're putting on a bloody show for you!" Dean shouted in Cormac's direction. "Bloody disgusting."

"That's all right," Draco said to Susan. "I'm able to cast the spell myself." He turned to look at Hermione, who was biting her lip and staring dazedly at the bed. "You ready, Love?"

Hermione looked up at him and blinked a few times. "Actually, I think I'm going to go and take a shower. It's been a long day and I really need to unwind." She grabbed her robe and put it on. Then she grabbed the shampoo, conditioner, soap and towel off of the dresser.

"You all right?" asked Draco.

"Yes," she said, looking at him. "I just need a moment."

He nodded and kissed the top of her head. She smiled at him before heading out the door. Pretty much the moment she was gone, the lights went off and the entire room became pitch black.

Draco stumbled to get to the bed on the left. He pulled back the covers and lay down, trying hard to ignore the squeaking bed and heavy breathing coming from

the back of the room. As much as he wanted to silence his ears, Draco hated the thought of not being aware of his surroundings, so he opted to suffer through it. At least until Hermione got back and forced the Sleeping Draught down his throat.

The thought of her showering instantly brought him back to their mornings in his flat. He had shagged her countless times in his shower and every single one of them had been amazing. His cock grew hard just thinking about it. It had been over a bloody fucking week and he was quite sure he was going insane.

Then it hit him.

Why *the fuck* was he not showering with her? The witch he loved was currently naked and alone, and he was doing *nothing* about it? This was not the Draco Malfoy he prided himself on being! Screw this bloody place and its rules! Hermione was not the only one who needed to 'unwind'.

Having made up his mind, Draco stood from the bed and felt around for his robe. He put it on before locating his slippers. Then he grabbed his towel and went on his merry way.

Luckily, the showers were not far. Only one of them was running when he got there, which made this task even easier. He walked straight to it and opened the curtain. There was a small area for undressing. He quickly dropped his towel, took off his clothes and placed them next to Hermione's. Then he went for the other curtain …

Draco pulled it back and Hermione whipped around. "Draco!"

He waved his hand and put up a weak Silencing Charm around their shower. It kept noises out, at least.

In one swift movement, Draco had Hermione in his arms and pressed up against the wall. He kissed her hard and rough, unable to hide the tension that had been building up inside of him for many, many days now.

"Draco, no!" she shouted, trying to turn her head away from his and pressing her hands against his chest. "We can't *here*! It's against the rules!"

"I'm a Slytherin, Love. We pride ourselves on breaking the rules and never getting caught."

"But we just got here! We can't be doing these things already! Not when they're not even sure they want us to stay!"

"All right, Granger," said Draco, lowering his hand and rubbing her clit a few times before roughly inserting two fingers inside of her. Hermione gasped. "If you tell me, and I mean sincerely tell me that you don't want this as much as I do, then I'll stop." Draco lowered his lips and carefully traced them down her neck, his hot breath leaving goose pimples in its wake. "But you have to mean it."

"I …" Another moan escaped her lips as he began pumping his fingers in and out of her. "I don't … Ah!"

Hermione closed her eyes as she began breathing heavily. Draco now had his thumb back on her clit and was rubbing it vigorously.

"Go on. Tell me, Granger. Tell me you didn't have my exact same thoughts when we were shown this place earlier. Tell me your mind didn't instantly flood with images of me fucking you against these walls."

Draco moved his lips down to her breasts and began sucking hard on her right nipple, then her left, his fingers never breaking pace as her moans grew louder.

"Tell me, Granger. Tell me what you want."

Hermione said nothing. Draco glanced up and could see she was biting her lip. So, in a movement as swift as his first, Draco stopped. Removing his lips, pulling his fingers out of her and stepping back. He crossed his arms and stood there patiently, though, there was no hiding his obvious arousal.

"Tell me, Granger," he repeated with a smirk. "I'm not going to do anything more until you tell me what you want."

Hermione looked at him, her mouth fallen open as she tried to catch her breath. She grabbed his waist and pulled him towards her, taking his cock in one firm hand while she kissed him aggressively. Then she leaned into his ear and whispered, "I want you to fuck me, Draco."

Draco's smirk grew. "I knew you did." He removed her hand from his cock and placed both on his shoulders. "Let's not waste our time on foreplay."

He put his hands on her arse and lifted her off of the shower floor. Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist and Draco quickly used one hand to guide himself inside of her. Both gasped at the contact. Merlin, she was even tighter than he remembered! Another sign that it had been too bloody long.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked while nibbling on his neck. "Fuck me, Draco."

Damn, that language! He knew he could get her to say it once, but the extra bit of dirty talk was actually making him harder, if, at all, possible. Nothing had ever sounded so beautiful coming from those lips.

Not wanting to deny the woman any longer, Draco pressed her back against the wall and began thrusting mercilessly into her. He had no interest in starting out slow tonight. They were going to shag and they were going to shag hard.

As his thrusting grew faster and harder, Hermione threw her head back, letting her screams fly free. It took her barely anytime at all to come, and she had not even needed to touch herself to do it.

Looking around the shower, Draco decided there was enough space in there to switch positions. He lowered her to the ground and turned her around. Hermione instinctually put her hands on the tiled wall and pressed her arse back into him. Draco gave it a squeeze before plunging back into her.

His thrusting only became rougher in this angle and Hermione could barely contain herself. His grip on her hips was so tight but she actually relished in the pain. It was just all so good. His cock, his hands, his rapid breathing, the hot water scorching her back. And then one hand loosened, creeping to her front and rubbing hard on her clit.

"Fuck, Draco!" she screamed, arching her back as she came for the second time.

But Draco was not slowing. He pounded her through it, clenching his teeth hard as he was determined to give her one more.

Hermione's legs were growing weak, but his death grip on her kept her upright. He pulled out one more time, turned her around and lowered her to the floor, lifting her legs over his shoulders before entering her once more.

Hermione's eyes instinctually closed as her body began to writhe on the floor. She threw her arms over her head and tried to grab onto something, anything, to brace herself, but there was nothing there. So she let her body run free.

"Open your eyes," Draco demanded in an almost demonic voice.

Hermione obeyed, staring up into those lust-filled, silver orbs she loved so much. It was while looking into those eyes that she found her third release, screaming louder than she ever had before.

Draco kept going, but the moment her final orgasm finished washing over her, he finally let go, releasing himself inside of her. After a few heavy breaths, he lowered

Hermione's legs before collapsing on top of her.

"Fuck," he said while trying hard to catch his breath.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly. She was not ready to lose this feeling yet. He was her only comfort in a place she feared she no longer fit into.

Draco nuzzled his face against her cheek. "We are *never* not shagging for a week again."

Hermione chuckled. "Whatever you say."

"Fuck, I love you," he said, giving her a kiss.

"I love you too," she said, stroking his cheek as she once again got lost in his silver orbs. Only, without the motivation of a great shag, she was much more aware of the water stinging her eyes. She blinked several times before wiping at them.

Draco laughed. "I suppose we should *actually* shower now."

He slowly stood up and pulled her with him. For the first time in days, the two of them almost felt normal as they cleaned each other like they used to. Back when privacy was more of option. And that was saying something, considering Theo, Bronson and Quigley did not understand boundaries.

Once Draco and Hermione were finished, the two of them dried themselves off and changed back into their clothes. But they were not ready to give up this time just yet. So they stayed there, Draco sitting on a small stool while Hermione sat on his lap, getting lost in each other in a way they had not been able to in days.

It was not until a door opened that they were finally knocked out of their reverie.

"Looks pretty dead in here," said the voice of Ginny. "I guess having a Death Eater on the premises keeps people from feeling frisky."

"At least Malfoy's good for something," said the voice of Harry.

"Oh, come on," said Ginny. "He's not all bad. He *did* stand up for me to Cormac earlier."

"You really think he wouldn't have done it whether Cormac said that to you or not?"

"I don't know," she said, "but I'd like to think it was for me. I've spent far more time with him these last few days than you have and -"

"And you think that doesn't kill me?" said Harry, his voice sounding strained. "That I've barely been able to see my best friend whose been missing for four and a half years?"

Ginny sighed. "Sorry. But maybe now that it's all out in the open, the two of you can finally sit together and talk."

Silence.

"I don't know what I'd talk to her about."

Draco felt Hermione's hands tense as they clung to his shirt. He looked at her and saw that her eyes were glazed over as she listened intently.

"Talk about whatever. Pollywogs … the weather … Quidditch! Why not Quidditch?"

"She hates Quidditch."

"So?" said Ginny. "That never stopped you from boring her with it before."

Harry chuckled. Draco smiled as he watched Hermione roll her eyes.

"I don't know."

"Malfoy told me that we can't baby her. She deserves to be treated like a normal person, despite everything that's happened to her. *Especially* after everything that's happened to her."

Harry sighed deeply. There were a few footsteps that were soon followed by the sound of running water. Ginny must have been drawing one of the baths.

"I know you know, Harry," she said. "Ron will deny it to the death, but part of the reason I love you is because you're not as thick as my idiot brother. You *know* what happened to her."

"We … we haven't confirmed -"

"Malfoy confirmed it for me. That first day. While she was sleeping, he woke up and I asked him. He told me I should ask her but he confirmed that it was bad. Possibly even worse for her than it was for the others."

Hermione whipped her head and looked at Draco accusingly. He just shrugged and mouthed, "She asked."

The only sound on the other side of the curtain was the running water. Then it stopped.

"It's not fair," said Harry, the pain evident in his voice. "This …" He gulped. "None of this should have happened to her. We should have won. You-Know-Who should be dead. Where … where did I go wrong?"

More footsteps. "I don't know," said Ginny. "But with Granger here now, I'm sure we'll figure it out. And Malfoy. He knows a lot. He can help us."

"Bloody pressure," muttered Draco.

Hermione shushed him. Since the Silencing Charm was weak without a wand, it had undoubtedly vanished by now.

"You're stressed, Harry," said Ginny. "You need to relax. Don't think about Granger. Don't think about Malfoy. Don't think about bloody You-Know-Who either. All you need to think about is your smoking hot girlfriend right here in front of you. And I know just how to make you relax."

There was a strange buckling sound. Followed by a zipping. Draco and Hermione's eyes widened as they suddenly realized what was about to happen.

"Ginny, not *here*," said Harry. "At least wait until we get back to my room."

"Why?" she asked. Draco pictured a pout. "No one's going to know. Don't you want to be adventurous with me?"

There was some shuffling of cloth.

"Oh, hell no!" shouted Draco, standing up and dropping Hermione onto her feet before gathering their stuff and running out of the curtain. Hermione hurried after him, pulling on her robe and keeping her head down as they ran across the room.

"What the -" said Ginny as she crouched down in front of Harry while he was seated on a bench.

"We're *so* sorry!" said Hermione, avoiding their eyes. "I promise we did not break any rules!"

"Except for numbers three and five," said Draco, stopping and turning towards the

blushing witch and wizard. "And might I add that we *really* broke number five." He winked.

"That's enough, Draco!" snapped Hermione, grabbing his arm and pulling him from the room.

"Did that *really* just happen?" asked Harry as soon as they were gone. "Like, for real?"

Ginny looked at him, her face still stuck in awe. "I believe so."

Silence.

"Ginny."

"Yeah?"

"That just kinda killed it for me."

Ginny frowned. "Understandable." Yet horribly disappointing. Oh bugger … So much for being adventurous.

# Chapter 34: A Day in the Life

**A/N: I don't know how I keep making these chapters so damn long … Oh well!**

**So in Word (double-spaced) I have officially written over 1,000 pages for this story. And when I started CaBW I actually thought it would be shorter than my other two. Obviously *that* didn't happen.**

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Draco and Hermione woke up the next morning to the sound of people bustling about. Opening her eyes a crack and noticing that everyone in their room was getting ready for the day, Hermione tried to roll away from Draco, but he was quick to pull her back, stealing a kiss before finally letting her climb out of bed.

Hermione immediately went over to their small dresser and began brushing her hair. She had no wand to dry it with the night before, so it had become exceptionally wild. In a pathetic attempt to tame it, she tied it back in a braid, but it did little use. She grunted.

Draco laughed as he watched her from the bed. He sat up and used a finger to summon Hermione towards him. She sat on his knee and he used his wandless magic to tame the frizz as best he could. Hermione whispered a 'thank you' to him and kissed his cheek before getting back up and grabbing her toothbrush. She went to a basin in the back of the room and began brushing.

While she was gone, Draco stood up and lifted his arms in the air, giving himself a good, beyond necessary stretch after sharing that ridiculously small bed all night. It was only then that he realized he must have taken off his shirt in his sleep. He got incredibly hot at night and was not used to wearing so much clothing.

Draco began searching for it but, while he did so, he could not help but feel a set of eyes on him. He looked up just in time to catch Cormac's floozy checking him out. The moment his eyes locked onto hers, she turned bright red and whipped her head in the other direction. Cormac, who had been standing right next to her, immediately noticed her reaction. He looked over at Draco and then at her again.

"The hell was that?"

"Nothing," said the girl.

Hermione, who had been watching the entire thing, smirked as she spat her toothpaste into the basin. "I think your girlfriend, or whatever she is, was just checking out my boyfriend, Cormac," she said before rinsing out her mouth. "*You*

*know*, the Death Eater."

Cormac looked accusingly at his girl. "Lucy, tell me you didn't fucking look at that scum."

"I didn't, Cormac! I promise!"

Draco chuckled. "Actually, I believe you did, and I don't appreciate being ogled like a bloody piece of meat. I am a person and you should treat me with respect."

Hermione rolled her eyes as she walked back towards Draco.

Cormac and Lucy began arguing while Draco grabbed his toothbrush and headed back towards the basin, purposely keeping his shirt off. When Lucy's eyes strayed again, Cormac went absolutely berserk. A few people left, not wanting to be around the drama, but Dean, Terry and Michael were having a grand old time, sitting on one of their beds and sharing Every Flavour Beans while they watched. Susan was still getting ready and trying to ignore them, but when Lucy burst into tears, she got a small, satisfied smile on her face.

Hermione was starting to tune them out as she chose some clothes for her and Draco. After grabbing some clean knickers and hiding them in her neatly folded shirt, she turned and briefly locked eyes with Cormac, who was bright red and looked like he just might spit at her. She smiled and went behind the curtain to change.

Draco had just finished brushing his teeth and was heading back to their space when Cormac pushed past him, nearly knocking him over. He was about to storm out of the room when his eyes fell upon the curtain Hermione was behind. Without another thought, he moved quickly towards it and tugged it down.

Hermione screamed as she moved to cover herself. At the moment, she was completely topless and her clothes were lost somewhere in the sprawled out curtain.

Cormac looked her over and immediately noticed the scars covering her body. "Did your Death Eater boyfriend and his *friends* give you those marks, Granger?"

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" shouted Draco, running over and tossing Cormac across the room before wrapping his arms around a huddled Hermione to cover her.

Susan ran over and immediately began looking through the curtain for her clothes.

"Not cool, McLaggen!" shouted Dean as he stormed over to Cormac. He grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him into the closest wall. "Your grudge is with Malfoy, *not* Granger, remember?"

"Who fucking cares? She's with him! Bloody brainwashed by those Death Eater pieces of shit. Probably believes she deserves those scars he gave her or something."

"I have never laid a fucking hand or a curse on her, you fucking prick!" shouted Draco. He stood up with his arms still around Hermione while Susan and Michael used their wands to rehang the curtain. Once it was up, Susan put Hermione's clothes inside and Draco helped her get in without being exposed. Then he marched over to where Dean still had Cormac pinned.

"Say whatever the fuck you want about me," said Draco, pushing Dean out of the way and pointing an angry finger into Cormac's chest, "but don't you dare, *don't you dare* say that shit about her! And if you *EVER* expose her like that again, I will not hesitate to fucking kill you!"

"Draco, don't!" shouted Hermione as she walked out of the curtain fully clothed. "Don't threaten him. He's not worth your energy." She grabbed his arm and pulled him off of the other wizard. Then she stepped into his place. "I'm not brainwashed, Cormac. I hate the Death Eaters who gave me these scars, just as I should. But Draco wasn't one of them. He is not your enemy anymore and I think it's high time you realized that. I have been around Death Eaters more than any of you, and very few of them are these cruel and evil villains you make them out to be. Many of them are just scared, like we are all scared every day. When You-Know-Who chooses you, it's become a Death Eater or die. And if you were put in that situation, I have a hard to believing someone as selfish as you would *ever* choose death!"

Draco smirked beside her.

"Tell me something, Cormac. When in battle, have you ever once stopped to think about whether or not you were killing someone innocent? Because Draco has. He's always thought about it. But *you're* the better person, right? Because *you* fight for the side of good while Draco … well, he's evil, isn't he? Even though he's saved countless lives while all *you've* done is take them, and probably without mercy."

"Fuck you!" shouted Cormac.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "If you truly cared about this war and our

victory, then you would realize that Draco being here can only help us succeed!"

"*Not* if he betrays us all."

"He would never," said Hermione. "And I am *NOT* brainwashed. I want You-Know-Who and everyone who ever tortured me dead, I want the world to be as it once was, and I want everyone to stop looking at me like I am the enemy! I *want* to win this, Cormac! So does Draco! For *this* side! Understand?"

Cormac said nothing.

Hermione sighed deeply and shook her head. "Expose me like that again and I will curse you myself." She walked away, dragging Draco with her. "Go get dressed," she ordered him. "Maybe some food in our systems will make this crappy morning slightly more tolerable."

"Are you hurt?" asked Lucy, walking up to Cormac and checking for injuries. He pushed her off of him and stormed out of the room. She looked around embarrassed before running after him.

After Draco was changed, he came back out to find Hermione sitting on the bed, her hands folded in her lap while she stared sadly at a spot on the floor.

"You all right?" he asked while nudging her chin.

She nodded. "I'm just sick of having this same fight all of the time. And the worst is that it's barely getting started."

"I know," said Draco. "But at least you look sexy when you get all angry like that."

Hermione tried to keep a straight face, but it was impossible to completely hide her smile.

"Hey, we heard we missed the show!" exclaimed Ernie as he and Padma walked into the room hand-in-hand. "Cormac's bloody pissed out there."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Let me guess. He's saying it was all *us*, isn't he?"

"Naturally," said Ernie with a smile on his face.

"It was pretty fucking beautiful," said Terry, who was still eating candy on his bed. "Cormac was pretty much dumbstruck during Granger's speech."

"It really was beautiful," said Susan, only she meant it in the literalist sense of the

word. "And you're right about Cormac, Granger. He and his friends have actually kept count of how many kills they got in battle before. It's disgusting."

"You know, Padma and I have been talking," said Ernie, approaching Draco and Hermione, "and if things are completely unbearable here for you then we'd be willing to give you our couple room for the remainder of the month."

Draco's eyes lit up. But, before he could get too excited by this, Hermione killed it by saying, "Oh, no. We couldn't possibly put you out like that."

"We couldn't?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow.

"*No*, Draco," she said sternly. "We will just have to make do until next month." She turned to Ernie and Padma. "How do we add ourselves to the list to receive a couple room?"

"Just tell Ginny," answered Padma. "She makes all of the room assignments."

With everyone ready, they all headed towards the dining hall for breakfast. During their walk, Dean, Terry, Michael and Susan filled Ernie and Padma in on the events that took place that morning. Draco and Hermione said nothing throughout it all, walking quietly as they realized this fight with Cormac was far from over.

"I can't believe he exposed you like that, Granger," spat Padma. "What an arse! I hope you tell Kingsley and McGonagall what he did so they can give him points for this!"

"As long as he doesn't try to get us in trouble, I see no reason to push this," said Hermione. "We still have to live with him for another few weeks and I don't want to make it even worse than it already is."

They arrived in the dining hall, which was not as packed as last night but still plenty crowded. All eyes lifted up and fell upon Draco and Hermione, per usual. They ignored them and were just about to follow the others to the same table as the night before when Kingsley stood up and said, "Ms. Granger and Mr. Malfoy."

They both stopped and turned towards him. He was sitting at a table with McGonagall, Harry, Ron and Ginny. The other seats at it were all available.

"Please come and sit over here. I would like to discuss a few things with you."

Draco and Hermione looked at each other and grunted. They could not figure out whether they were in trouble for this morning … or last night. Harry and Ginny were both making a clear point not to look at them.

They walked over and took the two seats directly across from Kingsley.

"Good morning, everyone!" Draco said brightly. He looked at Ginny, who was sitting beside him. "Did you have a good evening, Weaselette?"

"Not as good as it could have been," Ginny muttered so no one but Draco could hear.

"Minerva and I have been talking, and we have decided that the two of you should take part in daily chores with the rest of the residents here."

"Yes, of course," said Hermione. "We were expecting as much."

Kingsley nodded. "Mr. and Ms. Weasley," he motioned towards Ron and Ginny, "have graciously volunteered to let you shadow them today while they do their duties, then you will become full staff tomorrow. Mr. Malfoy, you will be in the kitchen with Ms. Weasley and, Ms. Granger, you will be on cleaning duty with Mr. Weasley."

Draco looked across the table at Ron and sneered. "Actually, I feel I am much for suited for cleaning than cooking. Granger has been learning her way around the kitchen for months now and -"

"This is non-negotiable, Mr. Malfoy," said Kingsley. "Every person is put in every position eventually. Ms. Granger will have her turn in the kitchen."

"If people are more proficient in one area, wouldn't it be more practical to leave them there always?" said Draco.

"If you prove yourself to be a completely incompetent cook then we will not be putting you in the kitchen again, but it would not be fair to keep people in specific areas when certain tasks are obviously more pleasant than others," said Kingsley.

"Hmm," said Draco, narrowing his eyes at Ron. "How *gracious* of you to volunteer your time like this."

Ron sneered back at him. "I'm getting more bloody coffee," he said, standing up from the table with his mug. He looked at Hermione. "Pumpkin juice?"

She smiled and nodded. "That would be great. Thanks, Ron."

"Coffee for me," said Draco, wrapping his arm around Hermione's shoulders and pulling her possessively towards him.

She huffed and rolled her eyes. "Draco, don't be rude. Ask nicely."

Draco smirked at Ron. "*Please*, Weasley."

Ron sneered at him and was about to say something, but stopped when Ginny snapped his name. "You promised," she said.

Ron groaned, but nodded before walking away.

As soon as he was gone, Hermione threw Draco's arm off of her shoulders. "Stop it!" she ordered.

"What?" Draco said innocently. "I always put my arm around you."

"Yes, and I am well aware of when it's genuine and when it's for show. I have had quite enough of your jealousy, Draco. I made my feelings for you very clear, but if that's not enough for you -"

"It is," Draco said quickly, unsure of where she was going with this. He sighed and rubbed her knee. "Sorry."

Hermione frowned. "Just don't do it again."

He nodded before kissing her cheek.

Hermione looked around to see the others were all watching them, none more closely than Harry. She cleared her throat. "So I noticed you all already have food. Can I assume that the process for obtaining breakfast is different than dinner?"

"Yes," said McGonagall. "Since everyone attends breakfast at different times, we set up a buffet in the kitchen between the hours of six and nine."

"I'll show you where to go," said Ginny, getting up from her seat. "I have to get back to the kitchen, anyway. Eat quickly, Malfoy, because I'll be expecting you to join me in there in twenty minutes."

Draco grunted as he and Hermione stood, following Ginny behind a swinging door. She pointed them towards the buffet table before heading for another door in the back of the room.

"Twenty minutes, Malfoy!" she called before disappearing.

Draco stared at the spot she had just been while Hermione went over to the table of food. "Is it just me, or does Weaselette look more exhausted every day?"

"Maybe our presence is stressing her out," said Hermione, shoveling some scrambled eggs onto a plate. There was nothing but sincerity in her voice.

"I don't think that's it," said Draco, walking over and grabbing his own plate. Actually, he had an inkling, but it was unpleasant and he was not about to share it with Hermione.

Once they had their food, they returned to the dining hall and, once again, sat at Kingsley's table.

"How was your first night?" he asked as they sat back down.

"Not horrible," said Hermione, picking up the glass of pumpkin juice that had been left for her. She looked at Ron again and smiled.

"Ugh!" shouted Draco.

Hermione looked over to see him holding his coffee mug far out in front of him, a look of disgust spread across his face.

"Are you trying to bloody poison me, Weasel?"

"If I was then I wouldn't be so obvious about it," said Ron. "Sorry. I must have given you the last of the old pot." He took a sip of his own coffee and made a satisfied sound before smiling. "Delicious."

Draco grunted before waving his hand over his mug, heating it up and adding some sweetener to the bitter disaster.

Hermione rolled her eyes before smirking in Ron's direction.

"Did Mr. McLaggen give you any trouble?" continued Kingsley.

"Not last night, no," said Hermione before taking a bite of her eggs.

"Then how about this morning?" he asked.

Hermione looked up at him. "It sounds like you're fishing."

"We heard rumors," said Harry.

"Already?" she said, tilting her head. "Honestly, this place is even worse than school."

"So something did happen?" asked Ron.

Hermione looked back down at her eggs and shook her head. "Nothing we couldn't handle."

Ron and Harry looked at each other skeptically, but they said nothing more.

When they were all finished eating, Ron stood up first, looked at Hermione and said, "Ready?"

She nodded and stood, but, before she could get very far, Draco grabbed her wrist. He looked at Ron and said, "One minute," before dragging her a short distance away. When they were as alone as they were going to get, he put his hands on her waist and pulled her close. "Remember what you promised," he whispered.

Hermione sighed. "I'm shadowing him, Draco. I don't know what you expect me to - "

"I expect you to try and always be with a group. He's not the only person here with cleaning duty."

She frowned. "You're really making this uncomfortable for me, you know? Ron is one of my best friends. If he wants to talk to me -"

"If he wants to talk about what happened to you then fine. But if he wants to talk about me, or our time together, or your feelings for him … *that* I'm not all right with. He hasn't let go of that hope yet and, until he does, I don't want you alone with him. I don't want to give him the chance to put any doubt about me in your mind."

"No one could ever make me doubt my feelings for you, Draco," said Hermione, reaching her hand up and stroking his cheek. "I really wish you would start believing that."

Draco grabbed her hand and gave it a kiss before leaning down and doing the same to her lips. They parted heavy-heartedly, Draco not taking his eyes off of her until she was out of his view. Then he went to the kitchen to join Ginny.

"You're late," she said as he entered. Currently, she was in the process of flipping pancakes. "We have another thirty minutes of breakfast. Then we clean up and pretty much instantly have to start preparing for lunch. It's the easiest meal, since we don't actually cook anything, but cutting up the meats, cheeses and breads for sandwiches can be very time consuming."

Draco walked up to her and said, "Where am I needed then?"

"If you could get a head start on the dishes that would be great."

Draco looked over to see the blonde girl from yesterday smiling at him as she cracked an egg and dropped it into a bowl. Hannah Abbott. All life drained out of him. *Shit.*

Draco nodded curtly before heading over to the sink.

"No arguments?" said Ginny, looking baffled.

Draco shook his head without looking at her and turned on the faucet.

Ginny looked at Hannah, who shrugged. She pursed her lips and watched him curiously for a moment before returning to her eggs.

Throughout the day, Draco kept a firm eye on Ginny. She looked incredibly exhausted and even seemed a bit weak. While carrying several of the clean plates towards the cupboards, she began to wobble. Draco hurried over and caught her just before she would have fallen to the ground.

"Sorry," she said as he steadied her. "There must have been some water on the floor or something."

"Uhuh," said Draco, looking down at the spotless floor. "*Or* you need to start taking better fucking care of yourself and get some sleep."

Ginny scoffed and said, "You're one to talk," before storming off with the plates.

"Malfoy, would you mind helping me cut this cheese?"

Draco looked over to see Hannah holding up a block of it. She was the only member of the kitchen staff, other than Ginny, who would talk to him. Much to his annoyance.

He nodded and walked over, taking the cheese from her. She pointed to the spot next to her where she had already set up a cutting board and knife.

"I think it's sweet that you're concerned for Ginny," she said while using her wand to chop up some lettuce. "But she really just overexerts herself. Padma checks her health constantly just to make sure and nothing's wrong with her."

Draco nodded. Of course, if his suspicions were correct then it was not something Padma would be able to identify.

"You'll hurt your wrist if you do it like that," said Hannah, looking over at him. "Here, let me show you -"

"I got it," snapped Draco, stepping away as she reached for his hand with the knife.

Hannah froze. She gaped at him, her eyes becoming teary. "Sorry. I … Did I do something to offend you, Malfoy?"

"No."

"Then why …" She gulped. "I just feel like you don't like me or something."

"I don't even know you," said Draco, returning to his cutting so he would not have to look into her sad eyes.

"Yes, but you … you remembered my name. Why?"

"We were in the same year."

"But Dean and Terry said you didn't remember their names and -"

"I was just messing with them," said Draco. It was not a complete lie. He had had an idea of their names, but he was actually thinking Dean's last name was Thompson and Terry's was Shue. While Ernie … well, he really had no idea about him.

"So you were messing with them when you said my name?"

Draco shrugged. "Guess so."

He could tell Hannah did not believe him, but she did not push the matter further.

At lunch time, Hermione showed up in the kitchen with a sandwich in hand. "Would it be all right if I ate in here?" she asked, looking at Ginny.

Ginny nodded and said, "Of course."

Hermione walked over to where Draco was cutting slices of tomatoes. She stole one and put it in her sandwich. "You better start cutting faster. They're completely gone out there."

"You try doing this shit without a bloody wand."

Hermione gladly put down her sandwich and took the knife. She cut the tomato

into several perfect slices in record time. She gave him a satisfied smile. "Perhaps you just need to correct your form."

"I tried to help but he wasn't interested," said Hannah as she walked by with a bowl of egg salad.

When she was gone, Hermione looked at Draco and frowned.

"What?" he said, reaching past her and grabbing another tomato.

Hermione stood behind him and guided his hand with the knife. "Don't be mean to her just because you feel guilty, Draco," she whispered. "Hannah is one of the few people in this place who is willing to accept you. You can't afford to be making any more enemies."

Draco tensed. Hermione released his hand and hugged him from behind. He reached back and put an arm around her, squeezing her into his side.

"So how has it been going in here?" she asked.

Draco shrugged. "It's pretty boring. Weaselette and Abbott are the only ones who talk to me. Everyone else pretty much ignores my existence."

Just then, a boy neither of them knew the name of took the finished tomatoes without saying anything. He did not even make eye contact.

"Lovely," said Hermione as he walked away.

"And how is *cleaning duty* with Weasel?" he asked with disdain.

Hermione smirked and pinched his sides. "It's fine," she said. "We swept and mopped the corridors, and next we're starting on rooms."

"Sounds tedious. They really feel the need to do this every day?"

"I think it's just meant to keep people occupied," she said. "So they don't think too much about what's going on in the outside world."

Draco picked up Hermione's sandwich and took a bite.

"Hey!" she shouted, pulling it away from him. "Make your own!"

"I haven't been granted permission by the powers that be to take my break yet."

"Go ahead," said Ginny as she walked out of the pantry with two more loafs of

bread. "You have fifteen minutes to eat. Then, at two, you'll be free until around five when we have to start dinner."

Draco grunted. He made a quick sandwich from the ingredients still left in the kitchen before grabbing an apple and letting Hermione pull him away. She headed right through the dining hall and did not stop until they were outside. The shielded area was bewitched so snow would not fall on it, making it far less cold and much more tolerable.

"I thought we could both use some fresh air," said Hermione, pushing him into a chair that was setup out there and sitting in his lap. "I hate being separated from you all day," she said, forgetting all about her food as she nuzzled into his neck.

"This does fucking blow," said Draco, eating his sandwich down quickly. He really was not even hungry. He just wanted to get it out of the way.

Hermione looked into his eyes and smiled before kissing him. Then she crinkled her nose. "You taste like mayonnaise."

"Just what every man wants to here," said Draco, taking a bite of his apple before kissing her again.

"I think you need another bite, or ten," she said with a giggle.

"I suppose next time you'll expect me to eat my sandwich dry then?"

She grinned. "If you would."

Draco squeezed his arms around her so her arms were pinned and smothered her with a million kisses.

"Gross! Draco, stop!" she shouted, unable to control her laughter.

"Granger."

Draco and Hermione stopped, the faint hints of laughter still escaping their lips as they looked towards the entrance. Ron was standing there, looking incredibly uncomfortable as he stared at the ground.

"Lunch is over," he said, briefly catching her eye before heading back inside.

"*Awkward,*" Draco whispered into her ear.

Hermione smacked his chest before standing. She tried to go inside, but Draco

grabbed her hand and pulled her back. He gave her a proper kiss before the two separated, yet again.

Hermione's next task was cleaning one of the two common rooms in the base. Ron swept while she dusted and polished. It did not escape her notice that the two of them were all alone in here. Draco would be angry, but it was not like she had any control over the situation. She was shadowing him, and normally each person just took one room. Tomorrow she would be alone. Maybe.

"So what happens when you go out on missions? Everyone else has to pick up your slack?" she asked.

"No," answered Ron. "They rotate someone else in. Not everyone has to work all the time. I don't know the exact numbers, but Ginny says there are enough jobs for about two-thirds of the people here."

"Oh." Hermione looked around the room. "Then where is everyone? Shouldn't they be in here enjoying themselves?"

Ron stared down at the spot he was sweeping and shrugged.

"It's because I'm in here, isn't it?" she asked with a frown.

He said nothing.

Hermione sighed. She scrubbed at the small table she was cleaning more aggressively. "So what is it about me people are so afraid of, anyway? Is it because I came here with a Death Eater, or because they don't know how to act around me after everything I've been through?"

"Dunno," said Ron. "Varies from person to person I reckon."

Hermione stopped her scrubbing and turned towards him. "And how about you, Ron? Which of those is the reason why you can't even look at me anymore?"

Ron stopped his sweeping and leaned onto his broom. He took a deep breath. "It's not that you came here with a Death Eater. It's that you came here with *that* Death Eater."

"Oh, so you would rather I came here with Rodolphus Lestrange? Or perhaps Antonin Dolohov. He's a real peach!" she spat before whipping back around.

"You *know* what I mean," he said, going back to his sweeping.

"I do," she said quietly. "He was a coward back then. I am aware of that, you know? But Draco has … he's done so much for me."

"So it's gratitude then?"

"No!" she snapped, turning her head in his direction once more. "I'm not going to *be* with somehow just because I'm grateful! I wouldn't do that! But he … we connect."

Ron scoffed.

"I knew you wouldn't understand," said Hermione. She stared at her hands and bit her cheek, trying hard to fight back tears. "I've been through a lot, Ron. And Draco … he gets that."

"Yeah, because he was part of it."

"He was not! In four years I never once saw him, because he would *never* own a slave!" Her face turned bright red as she shouted at him. But then she took several deep breaths to calm herself. "Look, I don't want to argue," she said. "And I'd be lying if I said I trusted him right away, because I didn't. I kept my guard up for a long time, so I understand why you're skeptical but … couldn't you just try? For me?"

Ron sighed deeply and looked over at her. "I'm never going to be his friend."

"I'm not asking you to be."

"I can't stand the git."

"And he feels the same way about you." A small smile twitched at her lips.

There was a long moment of awkward silence. Ron fiddled with his broom. Hermione's hands fidgeted in her lap while she waited for him to say something.

"Tell me about it," he finally said.

All color drained from Hermione's body as a huge lump formed in her throat. Her palms began to sweat as she started to wonder if this was the moment. Was this when she was finally going to be able to confess everything to one of her oldest and dearest friends?

Hermione gulped and quietly asked, "Tell you about what?"

"About you and Malfoy. And … and how it all happened."

The lump dissolved as Hermione turned away from him again. She was not sure whether she wanted to laugh or cry. Here they were, alone for the first time in four and a half years and *that* was what he wanted to ask her about?

"No," she said coldly. "It's none of your business." She sighed and closed her eyes, finally having to fight back tears. "Is that really the only thing you want to ask me? Nothing else?"

Ron thought about this, but it was obvious he was not thinking that hard. "No," he finally said. "Nothing else."

The tears finally spilt over, but she faced forward not letting him see them. The gentle sound of a broom sweeping the floor entered her ears. Hermione wiped her eyes and glanced sideways at him.

"You know, if you hunch over like that you're only going to hurt your back."

"I know how to sweep," he said. "You met my mum."

"Yes, and I recall her telling you once or twice the exact same thing," said Hermione, standing up and walking over to him. "Put your dominant hand lower," she instructed. "As far as it will go."

Ron grunted before lowering his right hand.

"Don't hold the other one so close to it," she said, grabbing his left one and bringing it up so it was exactly one hand-length down from the top of the stick. "Now give it a try."

Ron made one half-assed stroke.

Hermione crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at him. "Not funny, Ronald Weasley. Now, try it properly. You're going to be thanking me when you're fifty and not a hunchback."

"I doubt it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "You're as difficult as I remember."

"You're one to talk."

They stared at each other before breaking into light laughter. For a brief moment,

it actually started to feel like old times.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Hermione and Ron both turned to see Draco leaning against the doorframe. He did not seem happy.

"You look chummy," he said.

"Relax, Draco. We're *just* cleaning," said Hermione, walking back over to the table and picking up her cleaner and rag. "What are you doing in here, anyway?"

"Mack asked me to meet him here," said Draco as he walked into the room. He kept his eyes fixed on Ron.

"Who the hell is Mack?" asked Ron, returning Draco's distrustful stare.

"That's his little nickname for me!" exclaimed Ernie as he walked into the room. "For some reason he refuses to just call me Ernie and I guess Macmillan's a bit of a mouthful." He looked around the room, not blind to the tension. "Sorry, mate. I wasn't aware you guys were cleaning in here. The other common room's packed right now and Malfoy's agreed to play Wizard's Chess with me!" He held up the chess set he was holding.

"It's fine," said Ron. "We were just finishing up in here." He took out his wand and waved it at the pile of dirt he had swept up, making it vanish. "Ready?" he asked, looking at Hermione.

She nodded and picked up her duster from where she had left it on the floor. Ron headed out of the room, he and Draco never taking their eyes off of each other.

When Hermione passed Draco, he grabbed her arm and held her back.

"Don't," she said, prying his fingers off of her. "I'm shadowing him, Draco. I couldn't help this."

"What the fuck was that when I came in then?"

"Nothing," she said sternly. "I'll see you later." She leaned up and kissed his cheek before following Ron out.

"I'm sensing a hint of jealousy."

Draco looked over at Ernie.

Ernie smiled. "More than a hint, actually. Granger seems pretty smitten, though. And you definitely have a *cooler* vibe than Ron."

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "*Cooler*?"

"Yeah, you know, more … hip?" He stroked his chin. "I suppose that works."

"I am *aware* of what 'cooler' means, but you must be thicker than I suspected if you think that's what Granger's into."

Ernie smirked. "Ouch. But fine. I suppose you're right. I hope I'm not being disloyal to Ron by saying this, but you also exude a certain amount of …" He hesitated. "… intelligence that he just can't match."

Draco smirked back at him. "I'll take that one."

"After all, you were second in our class, weren't you? Mere points behind Granger."

Draco raised his eyebrows.

"I only know that because Padma *still* hasn't gotten over being third!"

"Was she?" asked Draco. "I thought Theo was third."

"They wrestled for it," said Ernie. "Best not to remind her of that, though. I'll never hear the end of it."

Draco and Ernie were able to get in a few matches before he had to return to the kitchen. Of course, he was not at the top of his game, considering his mind was never far from Hermione … all alone in a room with Weasel. But when she showed up near the end of his break, he suddenly started playing much better.

When Draco had to leave mid-match, she was quick to step in. While Wizard's Chess was not her favorite game, she would be lying if she said she was not good at it.

On his way back to the kitchen, Draco must have taken a wrong turn somewhere because he ended up near the bedrooms. He headed down the corridor he was sure was correct and turned left at the end of it … then he immediately turned around and went right.

"What do you mean you're leaving on a mission?"

Draco stopped before turning onto the next corridor. Weaselette?

"It's just a quick one," said a voice that could have easily been any of the Weasleys. A slight peek let Draco know it was George. "Kingsley just wants me and Angelina to go and get the information on Granger's name before sending the platoon on their next mission."

"But it's only two days until -"

"Ginny, I know," said George, stepping close to her and whispering harshly. "But I can't say no. You know I can't. The platoon's not far. I'll be back before then. I promise I will."

"And if you're not …?" asked Ginny, her voice cracking as she very obviously fought off tears.

"I *will* be," George said sternly. "Angelina and I can leave just as soon as we find Malfoy and pluck some platinum hairs off of his ugly head."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Did someone say my name?" he asked while turning the corner.

Ginny went white. "Malfoy. What are you doing over here?"

"I got lost," he said with a smile. His eyes moved to George. "Did you need something, Weasley?"

George did not move, his mouth in a straight line as he stared coldly at Draco.

Ginny grunted and walked towards him. She grabbed his hair and yanked.

"Ow!"

"This should be enough," said Ginny, handing them to George. He took them, his eyes never leaving Draco. "You and Angelina be safe."

Finally, George broke out of his daze and looked at her, his scowl becoming a frown. "You too," he said.

George gave Draco one last sour look before running off somewhere.

"The kitchen is this way, Malfoy," said Ginny, heading in the direction he had just come from. While they walked, she kept stealing glances at him, opening her mouth like she wanted to say something but never doing it.

"Something on your mind, Weaselette?"

"Yes," she said. "I wanted to ask you … well, it's sort of a favor."

"Let's hear it," he said.

"I couldn't help but notice that Granger came right to you during her lunch break."

"She did."

"And I just saw Ron a few minutes ago. When I asked where she went after they finished cleaning, he said she went to find you."

"Yeah, she did that too," said Draco.

Ginny sighed. "You *really* don't see how hard you're making this for us?"

Draco glanced sideways at her and cocked an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"Well, one would think that after years of being separated, she would want to spend her free time with Harry or something. I understand why she doesn't with Ron, but why not Harry?"

"Because she's busy looking for me," said Draco, fully understanding what she was getting at. "I don't know what you expect me to do about -"

"Oh, *I don't know*," Ginny derided. "Maybe guide her hand a little. Suggest that she go and find him, or me, or anyone really! Even though you've only been here a short time, everyone is already well aware that you have that sort of influence over her. Say the word and she'll do it."

"Not true," said Draco. "I tell her to do things all the time and all she does is argue with me over it."

"Not *this* sort of thing," said Ginny. "Please, Malfoy, I'm not the begging type but …" She took a deep breath. "We all really want our friend back, and her dependence on you is making it impossible."

Draco bit his cheek and turned away from her.

"And I understand that the dependence isn't just one sided, I do, but -"

"Fine," said Draco. "If she comes looking for me at lunch tomorrow I'll throw out the suggestion. But if she says no then I'm not going to push her."

Ginny smiled softly. "Thanks, Malfoy."

Draco turned back towards her and took a good look. Large, dark circles, ashen skin, clouded eyes, and a lackluster upturn to those cute, what-should-have-been-pink lips.

"You really look like hell."

"I appreciate the compliment."

Cooking dinner that night went fairly smoothly, but Ginny thought it best not to let Draco serve the food since people would, undoubtedly, be expecting him to poison them or something. He did not leave the kitchen until the last dessert tray was served. Since he had stayed behind, all of the dishes were finished and he was able to leave, so he went in search of Hermione.

Draco found her sitting at Harry and Ron's table, but she looked horribly uncomfortable there. He sat in the empty seat next to her and pulled her towards him.

"Did you get enough to eat back there?" she asked.

Draco nodded. He looked around. "So how come no one's keeled over from that poison I put in the mashed potatoes yet?"

The entire dining hall went silent. Were people all the way on the other side *really* perking up their ears that much to listen to them? Pathetic.

"He's joking!" Hermione shouted. She looked at Draco and narrowed her eyes. "Pick your audience, Draco."

He smiled. "I think I picked right. Wouldn't have been as funny with people who didn't believe me."

Once dinner was over, Draco and Hermione returned to their room. Hermione was just contemplating taking a shower when Ginny, Fleur and Victoire showed up with her bag.

"Kingsley said you could have it," said Ginny, nudging her niece, who was holding it. "Go on, Sweetie. Give it to her."

Victoire stepped forward and shyly held out the bag.

"Thank you, Vickie," said Hermione, taking it from her. "That was very sweet of

you to bring it to me. Wasn't it sweet, Draco?"

"Yeah, whatever," he said, picking at his nails as he lay on the bed.

Hermione immediately put the bag on the dresser and began unpacking their things. They might as well make themselves comfortable, since it looked like they were going to be here for a while.

Ginny, Fleur and Victoire sat on their spare bed, trying to strike up a conversation while Hermione worked. She pulled out some of her books first, followed by a few more outfits and the photo of her parents. On close inspection, she saw that Ginny had slipped her two-way mirror back into the bag. Tonight was the night she was supposed to talk with Bronson. She would have to find a quiet corner later. And then, right beside it, she spotted her chocolate bar. She smiled and took it out, propping it against the photo. For some reason, she always felt better when she had it close. She felt that way about her Knight Bus map and her knife too, but it just did not seem like a good idea to have that last one sitting out.

"So deed you 'ave Christmas een ze city?" asked Fleur in way that made it sound like Hermione was on vacation instead of trapped there.

"Yes," she answered, taking one last look through her bag in case there was anything else they might want on hand. "Draco got us a tree and I made ornaments." That she would never see again. "We spent the majority of the day with Andromeda and the others. He got them a tree too." She looked at Draco and smiled dotingly.

"Zat was nice of you," said Fleur, looking at Draco. She was one of the few people in this place brave enough to make eye contact with him. He liked that.

"I'm a nice guy."

Hermione, Ginny and Fleur all laughed. Draco scowled at them.

"Hey, Malfoy!"

Draco looked over to see Ernie standing in the doorway. Padma walked up behind him.

"Wanna come outside with me for a bit?" asked Ernie.

"Not really," said Draco, going back to the amusing task of picking at his nails.

"I really think you should. It's really pleasant out there at this hour."

"I'm fine right here."

"But I *think* you would be even more fine if you went with me out -"

"Stop beating around the bush, Ernie!" said Padma. "He got cancer sticks for you, which is going completely against my medical advice."

"Cigarettes?" said Draco, immediately sitting up on the bed.

Ernie smiled. "That's right."

"But you can only have one," ordered Padma. "Really you shouldn't have any but - "

"Yeah, yeah. Only one," said Draco, jumping to his feet. He gave Hermione a kiss. "Be right back, Love."

"Without a wand, I'll be expecting you to brush your teeth for a good half hour tonight to get that stench out," said Hermione while crinkling her nose.

"Whatever you say." Draco was practically dancing as he followed Ernie out of the room.

While in the hallway, heading for the outside, they passed Ron helping Harry towards what could only be the red room. Draco was going to let his jealousy slide this time, but only because he was in desperate need of some nicotine. Enough people were in there with her that they would not be able to get in any private time. Especially bloody Weasley. Draco had not been blind to her bloodshot eyes earlier. He had upset her, and he would definitely punish him for it. Later.

"Padma, I'm glad you're here," said Hermione, heading back into her bag. "Draco got me some books on Healing Magic, and I'm pretty sure they will do much more good in your hands than in mine."

"Really?" said Padma, her eyes lighting up and she hurried over to join her in her search.

"I know at least one of them is on Healer training."

Hermione found one of the books almost instantly, but there were so many in her bloody bag that she kept running across the same titles over and over again. She took her bag and put it on the bed, pulling everything out so it would be easier to find what she was looking for.

"Malfoy really bought you *all* of those books?" asked Ginny.

"He did," said Hermione. "I made him a list of all of the ones I wanted and he grabbed several more that he thought I'd like. It got pretty boring in his flat all day so I've read most of them already."

"Of course you have," said Ginny with a smile.

Ron walked into the room practically carrying Harry a moment later. Ginny immediately jumped off of the bed and helped her boyfriend into her vacated spot. Victoire ran over to Ron and danced around his feet until he picked her up. She let him hold her for about two seconds before she wanted down again, dragging him over to Hermione's bed so they could both investigate. That interested her for about another two seconds before she went running around the room.

"What's Malfoy doing with Ernie?" asked Harry.

"Fueling his filthy habit!" Hermione answered. She held up a book and flipped through it. "Oh, this one definitely!" She handed it to Padma.

Ginny scanned the books that were quickly spreading out on the bed. And then she spotted one in particular. *Complex Conundrums.* She picked it up.

"Is this the one Malfoy got you to exercise your mind?" she asked.

Hermione looked up and nodded. "Yes. It's mainly riddles. Go ahead and give it a go if you'd like."

Ginny began flipping through the book while everyone else watched Hermione go through the other ones, her eyes lighting up for the first time since she had arrived there. Even Cormac could not help but watch from the other side of the room. She definitely seemed like her old self in the presence of literature. It was almost as if nothing had ever happened to her.

"I think that's it," said Hermione, packing up the rest of her books while Padma scanned through the pile she had made for her. Five in total.

"Thanks so much!" said Padma. "All of the wizard bookstores are in towns taken over by You-Know-Who so I've never been given the chance to read stuff like this before."

"It's no problem," said Hermione. "You improving your Healer skills benefits all of us. The most any of these books will do for me is help me spurt out knowledge."

Hermione stood back up and put her bag back on the dresser. Her parents' photo looked a little crooked, so she straightened it. Then she pursed her eyebrows. Something was missing. It took a moment but, when it hit, her eyes widened. A nervous feeling instantly developed in the pit of her stomach.

Hermione began searching the dresser frantically. It wasn't there. She fell to her knees and scanned the floor. It wasn't there either. She pulled out each drawer and tore through them. Nothing.

"Where is it?" she muttered. "Where … where the bloody hell is it?"

"What's wrong?" asked Ginny as she and Ron hurried over to her.

Hermione pulled the dresser back and searched behind it, her eyes filling with tears as she came out from behind it empty-handed.

"It's not here!" she cried. "It's not bloody here!" Hermione kicked the dresser. She pointed at the photo. "It was right there!"

"What was?" asked Ron, looking around everywhere for anything that might be out of place.

Hermione did not even hear him. She took her bag and dumped everything onto the bed. "Where is it? *Where is it? WHERE IS IT*?" she screamed as she tore through everything on her bed.

Ginny grabbed her shoulder. "Granger, what -?"

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Hermione screamed. She hit Ginny off of her with such a force that she fell backwards.

Outside, Draco was greatly enjoying his cigarette. That first drag was heavenly. He breathed it in deeply, holding it far down in his lungs and savored the feeling before letting it back out again with a loud, "Ah." This was just what he needed.

Draco was a little surprised when Ernie lit himself one.

"I didn't peg you for a smoker," he said.

"Just on those really stressful days." Ernie smiled. "Don't tell Padma."

"Why are you stressed?"

"Well, you see, this guy that everyone here really hates saved my life, and they're

not too happy that I'm taking his side."

Draco was silent for a moment. "Sorry," he said, and he was surprised when he realized he genuinely meant it.

"S'alright," said Ernie. "Padma and I talked it over for a long while and we made our choice. You're not a bad guy, Malfoy. A little prejudiced towards Hufflepuffs. Pretty sarcastic. Definitely rude. But not bad. Everyone else will come around eventually."

"I doubt it," said Draco, taking another drag.

"Has Cormac given you anymore shit?"

"Not since this morning."

"Don't forget that offer on our room still stands," said Ernie.

Draco nodded. Now if only he could convince Hermione …

"Malfoy!"

They both turned to see Padma standing in the doorway. She was panting heavily, obviously having run there.

"You need to come quick! Granger's flipped her bloody lid!"

Draco's mouth fell open. "What?"

"She's flipped! She keeps screaming for something she can't find but no one can calm her enough to find out what it is!"

Draco dropped his cigarette and ran inside. He sprinted down the corridors as fast as his feet would take him, the sound of Hermione's screams flooding his ears as he got closer.

"GET OFF ME!" he heard her shout.

When he got inside, Ron and Ginny were trying to hold her down, but she was using Theo's fighting skills to keep them off. Then she was digging through a pile of stuff on the bed, briefly picking up her knife. Everyone gasped.

Draco hurried forward and tore the knife from her hands. He handed it off to Ginny, who hid it away in her pocket.

"Granger, what are you doing?" asked Draco, grabbing her shoulders.

"I need to find it!" she said, trying to wriggle loose. Tears were flooding her eyes and dripping heavily down her flushed cheeks.

"Find what?"

She made a dash for her stuff again but he held her still.

"Granger, look at me!" he ordered.

Hermione's eyes slowly drifted towards him. She blinked. "A shade lighter with a blue ring around the pupil …" she muttered.

Draco had heard her say that before, often when she woke up from her nightmares. It was not until he discovered what his father had done to her that he realized she was talking about his eyes.

"What are you looking for?" he asked once her eyes began to focus.

Hermione sniffled. "My chocolate bar," she said. "I … I put it against the picture of my parents but it's … it's not there. Draco, it's not there."

Draco pulled her against his chest as she began to whimper. His eyes scanned the area around them but he did not see anything. Then he noticed the slight traces of chocolate around the mouth of the scared child in her mother's arms.

Fleur followed his eyes down. Her mouth dropped. "I am so sorry," she mouthed before carrying Victoire out of there.

"Hold up!" shouted Cormac as he marched towards them from the other side of the room. "All of this is about a fucking *chocolate bar*?"

Hermione cried harder.

"She's bat-shit crazy!" said Lucy, who was making a point to stay as far away from Hermione as possible.

"That's right!" agreed Cormac. "I told you all that she's lost her bloody marbles! Maybe now you'll believe me!"

Draco was just about to lunge for him when Ron beat him to it. "Shut your fucking mouth, McLaggen!" he shouted, giving him a good punch in the jaw.

While the two of them began pounding on each other, Ernie called Draco's name. He and Padma beckoned him to follow them.

Draco scooped Hermione into his arms and carried her out the door. He followed them around a few corners until they entered a small bedroom with one full-sized bed.

"We thought you might want to get her away from the crowd," said Padma, running around the room to try and pick up a bit.

Draco laid Hermione down on the bed and sat down next to her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I … I didn't mean to react like that."

"Don't apologize, Love," said Draco, wiping away the stray hairs that were clinging to her wet cheeks. "Who cares what they think?"

Hermione gulped. "I do."

Draco sighed before leaning down and kissing her forehead.

"Gods, I'm so embarrassed," she said, rubbing at her eyes.

"No need to be!" Ernie said cheerily. "We've all seen worse!"

"Mack, come here for a moment," said Draco, standing up and walking into a corner. Ernie joined him.

"So was this a special chocolate bar?" asked Padma, going over to the bed.

Hermione sighed. "It was the first thing I was ever given after I escaped slavery," she answered. "I know it's stupid but -"

"No it's not!"

Draco clenched his fists while looking at the floor. Ernie waited patiently.

"I know we declined your offer before but -"

"Yeah, it's yours," said Ernie.

Draco looked up at him. "Just for a few days," he said. "Hopefully, everyone will just forget about this."

"I doubt it with bloody McLaggen as a witness." Ernie scowled at the thought of

him. "No need to rush. Padma and I will make do. We always do."

Within twenty minutes, Ernie and Padma had swapped all of their stuff with Draco and Hermione's. Hermione tried to protest, but her energy level was a bit weak and she was unable to do much.

Once Draco and Hermione were left alone, he lay down beside her in the bed and held her close. "I think the kid ate it," he said once her breathing became fairly steady.

Hermione sighed deeply and rubbed her cheek into his chest. "I guess I can't be angry at a three-year-old for eating some candy," she said.

An hour past, but neither of them were able to fall asleep, even after they changed into their pajamas. When a knock came at the door, both of them looked at it in surprise.

"Who the fuck is it?" Draco called as pleasantly as ever.

"It's Harry!"

Draco looked down at Hermione. She shook her head and sniffled. "I can't face him right now. Please, just tell him I'm asleep."

Draco nodded. He kissed her forehead before getting up and answering the door. "What do you bloody want?" he asked, stepping out into the hallway.

"Can I see her?" asked Harry, trying to steal a glance inside.

"No," said Draco, shutting the door behind him. "She's barely gotten to sleep and I'm not about to wake her."

Harry looked sadly at the door. "Oh." He reached into his pocket and pulled something out, which he handed to Draco. A chocolate bar. "If you could just give her that."

Draco looked down at it and blinked.

"I understand the other one probably had some sort of sentimental value but -"

"It's fine," said Draco. "Granger's better off without it. She has a bloody map of the Knight Bus route too that I probably should have torn up months ago."

Harry nodded.

"She's not crazy."

"I know," he said. "I … I want to help her."

Draco noticed as Harry's legs began to shake. "Better get out of here before those give out because I'm not going to fucking carry you."

Harry smiled softly. "I figured as much."

Draco continued to stare down at his legs. "So tell me Potter, do you *enjoy* when Weaselette gets 'adventurous' with you?"

"W-what?" said Harry, blushing as he stared intently at the floor.

Draco smirked. "You know what I mean."

"I … it's fine. Great. I mean … why?"

Draco shrugged. "I had a Great Uncle who was paralyzed. Couldn't feel a bloody thing from the waist down, and I mean *all* the way down, if you catch my drift," said Draco, his smirk broadening. "I'm not saying all paralyzed men lose feeling in their bloody cocks -"

Harry blushed brighter.

"- but it does give that small glimmer of hope that magic's involved."

Harry looked up at him, his mouth agape. His legs began to shake harder.

"Looks like you're running short on time. Better get out of here, Potter." Draco opened the door and stepped inside. "Night." He slammed it behind him.

"What did Harry want?" asked Hermione.

Draco held up the chocolate bar and walked over to the bed. He handed it to her.

While lying back down, his conversation with Ginny earlier suddenly returned to him. He could not believe he was about to say this but … "Be honest, Love. Am I actually making you feel any better?"

Hermione, who had been staring closely at the chocolate bar, suddenly looked up at him. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Of course you are."

"What I mean is … well, I can't exactly ease your embarrassment when I already understand what's going on inside of your head."

Hermione blushed and looked back down at the chocolate.

"I think this is Potter's way of reaching out, maybe letting you know that he's ready to talk."

With a sigh, Hermione said, "But I don't think I'm ready."

"Probably not," said Draco, "but were you ready when you first shagged me?"

Hermione looked back at him and blushed.

"Exactly," he said. "You're never going to be ready, Granger, which is why you need to push yourself out of this bloody bubble you've created and talk to him." Draco grabbed her face between his hands. "And now is as good a time as any to start."

She went white. "But we're supposed to contact Bronson in thirty minutes and -"

"I can do it without you," he said. "So just … go to bloody Potter before I change my mind."

Hermione smiled softly. She leaned in and kissed him. "Your mere presence *does* make me feel better, you know?"

Draco smiled. "Good. Now get out of here."

Hermione climbed out of the bed and put on her robe and slippers. She placed the chocolate bar into her pocket and then stared nervously at the door.

"You have exactly twenty seconds to get out that door before I pull you back over here and shag you senseless in this loaner bed."

Hermione chuckled and rolled her eyes. She gave him one last smile before leaving the room and walking slowly towards Harry's. When she got there, she stood outside for a good five minutes before finally mustering up the courage to knock.

"Come in!" called Harry's voice.

The lights flicked on as she entered. She looked over to see Harry in his bed, reaching over to his nightstand and putting on his glasses.

"Her - Granger!" he said, blushing as he realized he was shirtless.

Hermione laughed before locating a jumper hanging over a chair and tossing it to him.

"How come you're the only one other than Kingsley and McGonagall who has their own room?" she asked.

"Because I'm the only one who never switches bases," answered Harry as he pulled the jumper over his head.

"Oh," said Hermione, fidgeting with her robe. She felt the chocolate bar in her pocket and pulled it out. "Thank you for bringing me this." She looked up at him. "Do you want to share?"

Harry smiled. "Sure."

Hermione hurried over to the bed and climbed on next to him. She tore the chocolate bar in two and gave him half. They each took a bite. Both were silent for a moment while they chewed. Then the silence continued.

"Draco mentioned that … well, he thought that perhaps you might want to talk to me," she said, her voice giving her nervousness away. She fidgeted some more. "Do you?"

Harry took a long moment before saying, "Yes, I … I want to know. I want to know about what happened to you."

Hermione took a deep breath. "It's not a very nice story," she said while wiping at the tears in her eyes.

"I can handle it," said Harry, looking up at her. "You're my best friend, Granger. I want to hear it. I want to understand."

Hermione nodded. "Then I guess I should start at the beginning."

<p align="center">XXX</p>

Draco lay alone in the room, unsure of what else to do but watch the clock until one a.m. hit. When it did, he picked up the two-way mirror and said Bronson's name into it.

"Evening, mate!" said Bronson, looking especially chipper. "Where's Cupcake?"

"Working on rekindling her fucking friendships," said Draco.

"And you sound really pleased about that."

Draco grunted. "It's good for her."

"So tell me something," said Bronson. "That ex of yours, Pansy."

Draco's ears perked up.

"Is she the one who helped you escape?"

"She might have been," said Draco. "Why?"

"She approached me," said Bronson. "Apparently, your father found out about her and he plans to use her somehow to make sure you're not executed."

Draco groaned. "You can trust Pansy, but don't you dare get involved with my father."

Bronson nodded. "Good to know."

"Any news on Theo?" asked Draco

"Oh yes!" said Bronson. "Great news actually!"

"All right … go on."

"He remembers the night we met! Admitted it right to my face! Still not sure if he's faking the rest of his memory loss though … but he did let me blow him in an alley again! I'm pretty sure he felt as reminiscent as me but … Oh, wait! I never told you about the first time, did I? Just Cupcake, I think."

Bronson stared at Draco. He looked like he was about to vomit.

"Sorry, mate! Too much information?" He smiled brightly.

Draco groaned. "I fucking hate you …"

# Chapter 35: Do You Want to Know a Secret

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Hermione's head hung over the side of the bed, her mouth wide open as she screamed out in pleasure, all while Draco was thrusting into her. She had only returned to their room a few minutes earlier and he had pounced on her almost instantly. After the emotional night she had just spent with Harry, she hardly minded. She had actually been planning to seduce him when she got back, knowing this release was necessary if she was going to make it through the day, but, as always, Draco beat her to it.

At that moment, Draco gripped his hand tightly into Hermione's hair and pulled her head upwards. He kissed her hard, biting down on her bottom lip, pulling away just enough so they were panting into each other's hot mouths.

And then he was flipping her over. Hermione moved onto all fours, still trying to get into position when Draco thrust back into her.

"Merlin, you feel fucking amazing this morning," he said into her ear as he leaned forward. He caressed her hips softly for a moment before gripping them hard and pulling her into him so she could meet each of his brutal thrusts.

"So do you," Hermione said with a moan as he hit a particularly pleasurable spot.

"I could have been doing this to you all night if it wasn't for your bloody sleepover with Potter."

Hermione laughed as she suddenly realized exactly what this was. He was putting his claim on her. Without another thought, she moved away from him, turning around and pushing Draco back onto the bed. She climbed on top of him and kissed him tenderly. When he grabbed her head and tried to take control, she put her hands on his chest and held him down.

"I hope you know that you're just as much mine as I am yours, Draco Malfoy."

Hermione did not give him a chance to answer before she was guiding him back

inside of her. She grabbed the headboard behind him and used it to brace herself as she began bouncing on top of him.

"I'm fine with that," said Draco, letting out a soft moan as he lifted his head to suck on her breasts. "Are these mine too?"

Hermione chuckled. She let go of the headboard and cupped his face in her hands, pulling it back and giving him a kiss. "Yes. And these are mine," she said, stroking her thumbs across his lips."

Draco wrapped his arms around her. They continued to kiss as their last moments of lovemaking became much softer, holding their bodies close and looking into each other's eyes as both found their sweet release.

"Perfect," said Draco, kissing Hermione's nose as her body slackened in his arms. They lay there for a moment in silence before he finally asked, "How was last night?"

Hermione nuzzled into his chest. "Hard," she said. "But necessary. Harry was very understanding, but I don't think he realized the extent of how bad it actually was for me."

"Well, then it's good you flipped out over a bloody piece of chocolate. It gave that little posse of yours a reality check."

"Or it just confirmed for them that I really am crazy."

"But you're not," said Draco.

Hermione sighed. "Sometimes I really just don't know."

The small clock in the room chimed. Draco and Hermione looked to see that it was five a.m.

Draco groaned. "I suppose that means I have to go and get in the shower."

"I'll come with you," said Hermione, already climbing off of him.

"Oh no." Draco pulled her back and laid her down on the bed, pulling the comforter over her naked form. Such a shame. "You don't have to be awake for another two hours. Get some damn sleep."

Hermione tried to protest but, before she could, Draco silenced her with a kiss.

"No arguing," he said. "After a night like last, you need your rest."

Hermione nodded. She gave his cheek a rub. "I love you, Draco."

"I love you too," he said, giving her one more kiss.

Draco tried to move away, but Hermione quickly pulled him back. "I mean it," she said. "I don't know what I would do if you weren't here with me. I know you didn't want to come but -"

"Granger, stop," said Draco, putting his finger on her lips. "I want to be wherever you are. That's why I'm here now. Understand?"

Hermione nodded.

"Good. Now go to sleep." He gave her one last kiss before climbing off of the bed and getting his stuff ready to take to the showers.

Draco was happy to find the room empty when he got there. He really did not feel like dealing with people right now. On instinct, he went straight to the shower he and Hermione had shared two nights before. Of course, while he was in there, all he could think about was her arse pressed against those walls while he shagged her raw. Merlin, what he would not give to be in bed with her right now.

When Draco got back to the room, he was happy to find Hermione fast asleep. He kissed the top of her head before sadly leaving her and heading for the kitchen.

"Morning, Malfoy," said Ginny as he entered. "Sleep well?"

"No," he said, thinking of how he had slept alone for the first time in months. It was hard to believe that he used to prefer it that way. "And judging by those circles under your eyes, I would say it was the same for you."

Ginny looked at him and gave him an eye roll somewhat reminiscent of Hermione's. Only, it did not quite seem sincere, and he got the feeling she was putting on a show for him.

"So I just saw Harry," said Ginny, handing Draco an orange slice, which he quickly ate.

"Did you?"

"Yes. And he said that Granger came to his room last night after he gave her that chocolate bar he searched everywhere for. She told him that you mentioned you

thought he might want to talk to her." Ginny glanced sideways at him.

"I might have mentioned that," said Draco, stealing another orange slice.

She smiled softly. "Thanks, Malfoy. I know Harry's not exactly your favorite person but -"

"*That's* an understatement -"

"- it means a lot to him. So just … thanks."

Draco nodded.

Ginny looked around suddenly. When she saw no one was around them, she leaned in towards Draco and whispered, "Harry didn't tell me a lot about what he and Granger talked about. But he did mention one thing he thought was important." She gulped. "It was about your father."

Draco's body tensed. He clenched his fists as his throat became raw. He swallowed to relieve it. "Don't," he said.

Tears filled Ginny's eyes. "So it's true? He really -"

"I already tried to leave her once when I found out," said Draco, turning away from her so she would not see his own tears. "But I couldn't do it. I couldn't stay away."

"You didn't know?"

Draco shook his head. "It was before the slave trade. I … I didn't even know she was at the manor."

Ginny took a deep breath and nodded. "I believe you. Harry wasn't sure, but I'll set him straight."

"Where do you need me?" asked Draco, eager to get them off of the current topic.

"Do you know how to make waffle mix?" she asked.

Actually, he did. Bronson forced him to help in the kitchen from time to time and this was one of the few things he knew he could do right. Of course, they might not have all of the ingredients Bronson used, considering cooking was his profession and all.

"Yeah, got it," said Draco, walking to the pantry to see what exactly it was he had

to work with.

XXX

Hermione walked towards the dining hall with her eyes glued to the floor. She was extremely nervous to see everyone after her little 'episode' last night, but she knew she had to do it. If she was going to continue living here then she refused to be the poor former slave who sat by themselves and rocked in a corner. She was stronger than that. She knew she was.

But the moment she walked into the dining hall, all of her confidence went right out the door. Everyone was looking at her. Cormac and his little posse all started laughing. He was such an arse.

Noticing Ernie, Padma, Luna, Susan and Terry sitting at their usual table, she decided to head over that way. For some reason, she felt much more comfortable around them than she did with Mr. Weasley, McGonagall, Hagrid and Kingsley, who were all watching her closely.

"Good morning," she said as she approached them. "Mind if I sit here?"

"Not at all," said Luna with a pleasant smile.

Hermione smiled back and sat down across from her.

"I heard you had a rough night. I hope you're feeling better this morning."

Hermione blushed and stared down at her hands. "I am, thank you. And thanks again for letting me and Draco use your room," she added, turning her head towards Ernie and Padma. "We can switch back today if you would -"

"Just keep the room, Granger," said Ernie with a smile. "Personally, I like being given the opportunity to annoy McLaggen."

"Can you *believe* he had the nerve to ask me to heal the bruises Ron gave him last night?" said Padma. "If Ernie hadn't held me back I would have decked him one myse - Oh my gods! Baby, have you *tried* the waffles? They're amazing!"

"That's what everyone keeps saying," said Dean, sitting down beside Susan with his own large plate of waffles. "I was waiting in there for ten bloody minutes just to try some."

Padma fed Ernie a bite. "Holy fuck," he said, looking down sadly at his pancakes. He stood up. "I'm going back. Want some, Granger?"

"I can get it," said Hermione, trying to stand.

"No, I got it," insisted Ernie. He pushed down on her shoulder to keep her in her seat. "Anything else?"

"Umm … maybe just some fruit?"

Ernie nodded and went running off towards the kitchen.

"Bloody hell, this *is* amazing," said Dean as he stuffed his face. "Did Ginny use a new recipe or something?"

Hermione stared at his waffles curiously. "Padma, could I try a small bite?" she asked.

"Of course." Padma put some onto a fork and handed it to her.

As Hermione chewed her bit of waffle, she could not help but smile. "Draco made these," she said.

"You mean this is Malfoy's recipe?" asked Dean, looking down wide-eyed at his waffles - or what was left of them.

"Borrowed recipe, yes. It belongs to a friend."

"You know, if we told people that then there might be less of a demand for them" said Terry, trying to pick at Dean's waffles but getting stabbed with the other wizard's fork in the process.

"Get your own bloody food!"

Suddenly, Susan burst out laughing.

"What is it?" asked Padma.

"McLaggen's eating the waffles."

Everyone looked over at him and, sure enough, he and everyone else at his table had waffles on their plates. They all laughed. When Cormac looked at them, they turned away and pretended that everything was just dandy.

"Where's the coffee?" asked Hermione, knowing very well that she was going to need some today.

"Through there," said Padma, pointing at a door on the opposite wall of the one

leading to where the food was.

Hermione stood up and headed there. Pretty much the moment she got back to the table, Ron and Harry, who was being held up by his friend' shoulders, entered the dining hall. Ron tried to head to their usual table, which had just been vacated, but when Harry saw Hermione, he pointed at her and made Ron reroute.

"Good morning, Harry," said Luna as Ron helped him into the seat beside her. "You don't normally sit with us."

"Yes, do what do we owe the pleasure," said Terry, still trying to steal bites off of Dean's plate.

"Just mixing things up a bit," said Harry, smiling across the table at Hermione.

"Hey, guys, did you *know* that Malfoy is the chef behind the illustrious waffles?" asked Ernie, loud enough so that Cormac heard him and spit out his food mid-bite. Ernie smirked. "I was hoping for that sort of reaction." He handed Hermione a plate and sat down beside her. "Ginny's working him like a slave driver in there. Hannah finally had to step in to do the stirring with her wand since his arm was bloody killing him."

"Did you go into the kitchen or something?" asked Hermione as she lifted her fork and dug in.

"I had to! The line was way too long to wait in, so I figured I'd go right to the source." Ernie leaned in. "Malfoy told me to make that announcement so that maybe the demand would die down a bit."

"Doesn't look like it," said Terry with a frown.

"Oh, just get in bloody line already!" shouted Dean.

Hermione glanced across the table at Ron. He seemed to be avoiding looking at her and she had to wonder if Harry had told him anything about their conversation. Part of her hoped that he had, since Ron clearly was not willing to ask her about it himself.

Ron got up to get coffee for him and Harry. While he was gone, Draco and Ginny walked over to their table from the kitchen.

"Heard you're fans," said Draco, tossing a plateful of waffles into the center of the table before taking a seat next to Hermione. He immediately put his chin on her shoulder. She turned her head and kissed his forehead.

"Ah, sweet!" shouted Terry, reaching out and grabbing several waffles onto his fork. "You see, Dean? I told you great things come to those who wait?"

Dean rolled his eyes. And then he took two more waffles for himself.

Ginny sat down next to Harry and put a plate she had specially prepared in front of him. She had another one that she put on her other side, presumably for Ron.

When Ron got back, he did not look pleased to see Draco sitting there, one arm hugged around Hermione's waist while the other picked at the fruit on her plate.

"B would be happy you did his recipe justice," said Hermione with a smile.

Draco groaned at the thought of Bronson. Their conversation last night was still lingering in his head and, more than ever, he wished he had a wand so he could erase it all.

"So since you're out here, does that mean everyone's going to be stuck in the queue for a while?" asked Susan, looking over at the crowd of people who were still waiting for waffles.

"Hannah was helping him, so she's giving it a go," said Ginny. "I really hope she doesn't forget the cinnamon."

"Granger."

Hermione looked up from her food to see Fleur and Victoire standing beside their table. "Morning," she said, blushing a little as she looked down at the nervous child.

"Victoire ees *very* sorry for yesterday. Aren't you?"

Victoire hugged shyly onto her mother's leg and nodded.

"Say eet."

Victoire gulped. "I am vewy sowwy I ate your choclat."

Hermione tried to smile. "It's all right. I'm sorry if I scared you."

"You 'ave no reason to apologize. Victoire knows better zan to take zings zat do not belong to 'er. Don't you?"

Victoire nodded again.

"Go on. Give 'er your gift."

Victoire let go of her mother's leg and walked towards Hermione, keeping her eyes on the ground. She handed her something and Hermione held out her hand. It was a necklace. The chain was simple and silver but the charm on it was her chocolate bar wrapper folded into the shape of a rose.

"Victoire was up all night making zat for you. Eet took many tries," said Fleur with a smile.

"It's beautiful. Thank you, Victoire," said Hermione, giving the little girl a pat on her head.

Victoire smiled and hugged her.

"A three-year-old really made that?" said Ernie, looking amazed as he studied the charm in Hermione's hands. "I don't think even I could do something like that."

"You definitely couldn't," said Padma with a smirk.

"'Er auntie, Luna, 'as been teaching 'er to make jewelry since before she could walk," said Fleur, giving Luna a smile.

"Draco, could you help me put it on?" asked Hermione, holding it out to him.

Draco undid the clasp while Hermione lifted her hair out of the way. He wrapped it around her neck and did the chain right on top of the one he had given her. Hermione adjusted it, accidentally grabbing her other chain and pulling the necklace out of her jumper.

Every last person at the table froze. Hermione looked around at them. "What is it?"

"Is that an engagement ring?" asked Ginny, her eyes wide as she pointed to the silver ring with the amber stone hanging from her neck.

Hermione looked down at the ring and grabbed it. The entire dining hall had gone silent and all eyes were on her. But none were wider, or angrier, than Ron's.

"N-no. No, it's not," said Hermione, glancing sideways at Draco. He had his head raised defiantly, ready to challenge anyone who dared comment right now. Hermione took a deep breath. "But it's going to be. Draco and I have already decided that if we both survive the war then we're going to get married."

The silence continued. It hurt a little that even Ernie and Padma looked shocked

by this announcement.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

The moment the foul language came out, Fleur grabbed Victoire and carried her out of the room.

Hermione and Draco turned their heads towards Ron. His brow furrowed as he stared daggers at the two of them, his face such a bright shade of red that it was impossible to make out his freckles.

"Are you *fucking* kidding me?" he repeated, his fists slamming down on the table.

"Ron, don't," said Ginny, grabbing at his arm, but he quickly pushed her off.

"No! I've kept my bloody mouth shut until now, but *this*? *Marriage*? I can't sit back and take this any longer!"

"Ron!" snapped Harry. "This is not the time."

"Then when is the bloody time, exactly? *When* am I supposed to ask this shit when he's always *fucking there*?"

"Why not yesterday when you had me alone for *hours*?" said Hermione with disdain. "I gave you the opportunity to ask me -"

"I *did* ask you!"

"About Draco!" shouted Hermione, jumping to her feet and slamming her hands on the table. "Always about *bloody* Draco! One would think that there were more important matters you might want to ask me first! But fine! You want to know about me and him? I love him, he loves me, and the day the war ends he's putting this ring on my finger and we're getting married! *Understand*?"

Ron glared at her from across the table.

"But … well, it's all a bit quick, isn't it?" said Ginny. "I mean, you've only been together for two months."

Draco's face clenched as he slowly moved his eyes to Ginny. She glanced down at the table and refused to meet his gaze. It had been a long time since he had ever felt so disappointed in someone.

"Bloody fucking waste …" Ron muttered.

"What was?" said Hermione, standing up straight and crossing her arms.

"The last four and a half years of my fucking life that I spent waiting for you," he spat.

Hermione went white as her entire body began to shake.

"I *FUCKING* WAITED FOR YOU!" shouted Ron, standing up so he could meet Hermione's stare with his own. "While you … you didn't even wait two bloody months after getting free to move on! With a *FUCKING* Death Eater!"

Hermione's arms dropped to her sides.

"He's killed our friends, Granger! *Murdered* our friends! Our families! *My* family has been cut in bloody half because of people like *him*!" Ron pointed an accusing finger at Draco.

"I have *never* killed a member of your fucking family, Weasel!" shouted Draco, now rising to his feet.

"Do you have proof of that, Malfoy?"

Draco narrowed his eyes. He began muttering several foul words before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a notebook. *His* notebook.

"Draco, why do you have that?" asked Hermione, trying to grab it away from him.

"I found it in your bloody bag," he said.

Hermione gulped. "I was hiding evidence from You-Know-Who. I didn't want him to find the pages we wrote on together."

"And *I* didn't want incriminating evidence sitting exposed in our room all day. But you know what? Fuck it." Draco ripped out the first few pages.

Hermione gasped. She tried to grab them again, but he threw them at Ron before she could. She stretched across the table and grabbed at them frantically, but Ron got to them first.

He saw it was a list of names. Some he recognized, some he did not. "What is this?" he asked.

"It's a list of every person I've ever killed," Draco hissed. "Do what you want with it because I'm fucking done with this shit. I didn't come here pretending to be a saint.

I've done a lot of awful things. I've killed a lot of innocent people. But it was not a choice! As a Death Eater, you have two choices! Kill or die!"

"For many of us here, there would have only been one choice," spat Ron. "You should have bloody offed yourself the first time You-Know-Who asked you to kill someone."

Draco clenched hard onto the sides of the table. "If I had done what you're suggesting, do you know where we'd be right now?" he said through clenched teeth. "I would be dead, Granger would be dead, Ernie would be dead, Seamus would be dead, and everyone on that *fucking* list would still be dead! If it hadn't been me then you better believe that someone else would have gladly stepped in and made it far more painful than I ever did! So you tell me, Weasel, where's the *fucking* line? Because I would *really* like to hear your answer!"

Hermione whimpered beside him. "Ron, please … please give that back," she pleaded, holding her hand out to him.

"Read it out loud, Weasley!" Cormac shouted from his table.

"Yeah! Come on, let us hear it!" someone else called.

"Ron …" Harry said in a tense voice. "Give it to her."

Ron looked down at the list in his hands, and then back at Hermione. The corners of his lips dropped as tears filled his eyes. He folded the papers and put them in his pocket.

"I'm going out," he said, stepping away from the table. "Susan can take you around today."

Ron turned away quickly and headed for the door.

As soon as he was gone, Hermione whipped towards Draco. "Why did you do that?" she screamed.

"It was what he wanted," said Draco. "Just more proof that he's better than me." He stormed off towards the kitchen.

"Draco!" Hermione ran after him. "Draco Malfoy, we're not finished here!"

Draco entered the kitchen, where everyone stood frozen. They had obviously all been listening. He marched right past them and headed for the pantry with Hermione at his heels. When they got inside, she slammed the door and he waved

his hand, putting up a Silencing Charm.

"Why, Draco?" she cried. "Why did you do this? We won't be able to stay here after this! I don't want to leave! I don't want to go back out there!"

"We won't," said Draco, leaning against the door. "I've studied that list, Granger, and very few people here will be affected by the names on it." Ironically, Cormac was one of the handful that would. Draco had killed his cousin two years earlier after he was captured raiding a Death Eater's home.

"That's not the point! Just what exactly were you trying to prove?"

"I don't know," said Draco. "Heat of the moment."

"Heat of the moment?" Hermione repeated. "You *fucking* idiot!"

She brought her hands up to her face and sobbed into them. Draco sighed deeply before stepping forward and taking her into his arms. "I'm sorry," he whispered while holding her tightly. "I know it was stupid, I do, but I just couldn't stand all of their fucking faces when you told them you were going to marry me."

"So you made it worse?" she cried.

"Not intentionally," he said, "but it would seem that way."

Hermione cried harder. "Merlin, you're bloody difficult."

"So I've been told."

She giggled briefly before sobbing again. "I hate you."

"Yes, and I have come to know that as another word for 'love'." Draco kissed her forehead. "Do you think he'll show it?"

"I don't know," she said. "I really hope not."

While Draco did not voice it aloud, he truly did have that same hope. It was a stupid move, and he honestly could not believe he had done it.

"I don't want Ron to hate me," Hermione said softly, her face still buried in his chest.

Once Hermione had calmed down a bit, Draco used his wandless magic to clean her face up and the two of them left the pantry. Hermione went to find Susan so

she could spend the day shadowing her while Draco stood frozen in the center of the kitchen.

"In spite of everything, there's still a high demand for waffles."

Draco broke out of his daze and turned to see Hannah watching him, a smile plastered on her face as she stirred batter in a bowl without the aid of a wand.

"I don't think mine are as popular as yours. Care to give it another go?"

Without a word, Draco walked over and took the bowl from her.

A few minutes later, Ginny walked back into the kitchen and nervously headed over to him. "Did Granger leave?" she asked.

"She went to find Susan," Draco said, turning his body away from her.

Ginny took a step to follow his movements. "I went looking for Ron but I couldn't find him. But I'm sure when he gets back he won't show -"

"If I cared then I wouldn't have fucking given it to him now, would I?"

"But you do care," said Ginny. "I know that you do."

"Don't pretend that you fucking know me, Weaselette. Only one person in this whole fucking place does and it definitely isn't you."

Ginny sighed. "Look, Malfoy, I'm sorry we all reacted that way, but it just … well, it took us by surprise, is all. I mean, you have to admit, the idea of you and her getting married does sound kind of crazy. Pureblooded Death Eater, Muggle-born slave. It's weird."

"And quick?" said Draco, cocking an eyebrow.

Ginny blushed and looked down at the floor. "Yes, that too."

"I disagree," he said, focusing back on his stirring. "In this present world, I think it's important to find who you care about and hold onto them. That's why I'm fucking here."

"I know, I get that but -"

"You know, I'm normally pretty good at reading people."

Ginny looked up at him.

"Mack and Patil are genuine. I knew that right away. Same with that Lovegood girl and even Abbott over there." He motioned with his head. "The others, Thomas, Boot, Corner, Bones, they don't like me very much but they're at least giving me a shot. Potter and Weasel … I don't think I even need to explain to you how they feel. And then there's you," said Draco, stopping his stirring and looking very seriously at her. "I wasn't sure about you from the beginning but, I admit, I let my guard down a little and started to think that you were one of the few people in this place who might be all right. But it seems I was wrong."

"N-no. You weren't -"

"So what exactly is your plan, Weaselette? Stay close to Granger since Potter and Weasel have been failing so miserably at it, pretend to like me but secretly be trying to push her back towards your brother?"

"No," Ginny said sternly. "I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't manipulate -"

"I don't believe you," said Draco. "The whole lot of you just want to pretend that nothing ever fucking happened to her. That things can just go back to the way they were without any repercussions."

"I … I don't -"

"She's not the same person anymore, Weaselette. And her and your brother … never going to fucking happen whether I'm in the picture or not," he said. "But, if you want to get rid of me that badly, just speak to Kingsley. He's already pretty much guaranteed a way so that I'm never going to be able to marry her."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you can get fucking rid of me whenever you want, so maybe you should just bloody get it over with."

Draco began to walk away, but Ginny followed after him. "Malfoy, wait. What - Ah!"

Draco turned back around to see Ginny clutching at her head. She had moved too quickly and a horrible dizzy spell caused her to use the counter for support. But, still, she was falling. Draco dropped his bowl and went to catch her.

"Fucking hell, Weaselette! Take a bloody day off already! Especially with tomorrow being …" Draco trailed off. *Shit.*

"What?" asked Ginny, turning white. "What's tomorrow?"

Draco reached into his pocket and pulled out a small phial. "Drink this."

"What is it?" asked Ginny, looking at the bottle skeptically.

"Something I mixed up last night while Granger was with Potter," said Draco, forcing it into her hand. "It will make you feel better. At least temporarily."

"But what is -?"

"You're just going to have to fucking trust me," said Draco. He let her go and went back over to where his bowl and spilt on the ground. With the wave of his hand, it was all cleaned up and he started to mix another batch.

All through breakfast, and then lunch Ginny held onto that phial, stealing glances at it whenever she thought no one was looking.

During her break, she sat alone on Harry's bed while he was in with Kingsley and McGonagall, holding it in her hand and staring at it. Finally, with a deep breath to give her confidence, Ginny pulled the cap off of the phial, closed her eyes and drank it down. Almost immediately, the horrible headache from exhaustion faded, and she could feel the natural rosiness return to her cheeks.

Then Ginny began to cry. She clutched the bottle so hard that it shattered in her hands, the glass pressing into her palms and causing them to bleed. She could not believe it. No normal potion could have worked on her like that. Not with her condition. Somehow, Draco Malfoy must have figured out her secret, and he had helped her.

She cried harder. He had not been wrong about her. Ginny did want Hermione back with Ron, but only because he had been so miserable without her. But Draco was right. Hermione was not the same person anymore. None of them were. Things were never going to be the same between all of them, and knowing that hurt a hell of a lot more than any other pain she might suffer. Even the pain she would surely feel tomorrow night …

<p align="center">XXX</p>

The next day, Draco sat outside with Ernie, smoking a cigarette. He had gotten out of his duties for the day when Kingsley showed up in the kitchen that morning and called him away. He was brought to his office, where Hermione, Padma and McGonagall were already waiting. Apparently, Padma had gotten permission to look into his memories and study the effects of the Cruciatus Curse on Hermione.

While Hermione did not exactly look happy about this, she did not argue.

As it turned out, Kingsley and McGonagall had a Pensieve hidden away in a secret compartment in their office. He spent the majority of his day giving Padma carefully selected memories. In the beginning, it was easy, but once they hit around the time he and Hermione started shagging, it was hard to find memories worth sharing where they had their clothes on.

Near the end of this tedious task, their office door flew open and Ginny came in. She seemed to be freaking out that George was not back yet and wanted to know if Kingsley had heard anything from him. After telling her that George and Angelina would be back the following morning, she burst into tears and ran away.

Once they were finished with everything, Padma asked Hermione if she could help her translate a few things in one of the medical books she had given her. As soon as they were gone, Draco had gone in search of Ernie since he was completely desperate for a cigarette after the last couple of days.

"How long until you think Weasel fucking shows up again?" asked Draco while taking a drag of his cigarette.

"Dunno," said Ernie. "He does this sometimes. Disappeared for over a week once. No one knows where he goes, not even Harry."

"Hmm …" Draco slowly blew the smoke back out of his lips.

"I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. There's no way he's going to show that list knowing Granger will hate him for it."

Draco nodded and took another drag.

"But in case he does," said Ernie, looking off to the side, "is there anything I should know?"

"I've never killed any members of your family," said Draco, "but I'm not sure about friends."

Ernie bit his cheek. "I guess I should've known I was in the clear since you're able to talk to me."

Draco glanced sideways at him and cocked an eyebrow.

"That's why you can't even look at Hannah, isn't it? Because someone in her family is on that list. That's what she thinks, anyway."

"I guess we'll find out," said Draco.

"But we might not," said Ernie. He took a deep breath. "Look, Malfoy, Hannah's not like most of the people here. She's good, through and through, and she wants to know what's happened to everyone in her family. Not to hate or take revenge on the person who killed them, but just to know, so she could move on."

Draco said nothing.

The two smoked in silence for a while before Draco finally asked, "What do you think of the idea of me and Granger getting married?"

"I dunno," said Ernie. "I can see why people think it's weird, and it is pretty quick, but the two of you seem in love so why should anything else matter?"

Draco could not help a small smile.

"Besides, I would've married Padma the first year we were together if it weren't for the war. We talked about it before, but after I was captured last year we decided to wait and make sure we both survive this. Like you guys."

Draco nodded. And then his fists clenched. "I just can't believe fucking Weasel, trying to make her feel guilty with all of that 'I waited for you' crap."

"Yeah, especially since everyone in that bloody room knew it was all bull sh -" Ernie froze.

"All what?" asked Draco, whipping his head in Ernie's direction.

"Nothing," said Ernie, dropping his cigarette and putting it out with his foot. "Forget I said anything. I should probably go and find Padma before din -"

"Mack," said Draco, grabbing Ernie's arm as he moved to leave. "Don't you dare fucking lie to me. Did he or did he not fucking wait for her?"

"He did," said Ernie, grabbing Draco's wrist and pulling him off of his arm. "As in, he's never had a girlfriend in all of these years. Not to say that girls haven't tried."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "So you're saying what exactly? That he's been shagging other girls?"

Ernie blushed and looked away. "Not … *a lot* of other girls. And it's not like I've actually *seen* him shagging anyone. There have just been … rumors. Like, you know that girl, Lucy?"

"McLaggen's slag?"

"That's right," said Ernie. "She had a thing for him for a long time, and the two of them would often disappear together, but no one *really* knows what happened. Only that she can't even look at him now without getting the gleam of murder in her eyes. Which is why I think she's being such a bitch. Normally, she's better at keeping McLaggen in line, but I think she's pissed."

"About what?" asked Draco.

"You know …" said Ernie with a shrug of his shoulders. "That Ron wouldn't be her boyfriend because of Granger, and now they're not even together. She'd dump McLaggen in a heartbeat if Ron said the word, but he's never going to. I don't think Ron ever even liked her. She was just … there."

Draco felt sick. He had never been so disgusted in his entire life. While Hermione, the girl Ron claimed he was in love with, was being tortured and raped on a daily basis, he was out shagging some random slags!

Sure, she had moved on too, but not with just anyone. She and Draco had not done anything until they knew their feelings were real, and there was *nothing* random about it.

"Look, Malfoy, Ron's my mate. Has been for a long time. Please, just don't -"

"I won't say anything," said Draco. But Ron would. He was going to make damn sure of that.

"I really do need to go find Padma," said Ernie. "She's probably still will Granger if you want to come."

"No," said Draco. "I have something I need to do. Tell Granger I won't be at dinner, and have her get me a thermos of coffee. I'm going to bloody need it."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ernie with wide eyes.

"Nothing to do with fucking Weasel, don't worry," said Draco.

Ernie nodded. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cigarettes. "Don't tell Padma," he said while handing them to Draco. He smiled before leaving.

Once he was gone, Draco leaned against a tree just beside the tent and waited. Barely ten minutes past before Ginny was running out of the tent wearing a backpack.

"Going somewhere, Weaselette?" he drawled.

Ginny whipped towards him in a panic. So jumpy.

"Malfoy! What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for you," said Draco, dropping his current cigarette and putting it out with his foot.

"Me?" repeated Ginny. "Why?"

"I want to show you something," he said while walking towards her.

Ginny backed away from him. "I … I don't have time for this right now. We're running low on some ingredients in the kitchen and I have to go find a town to pillage -"

"We both know that's not true," said Draco. "Now, come along."

He began walking towards the barrier. It was a moment before Ginny started to follow him. Draco knew they were through it the moment his foot touched snow. Luckily, he had been smart enough to grab his cloak before heading outside with Ernie.

"Help me out here, Weaselette. Which direction is Hogwarts in?" he asked.

Ginny pointed to the east.

"Right. This way then," he said, heading northwest.

Ginny followed him obediently at first, but the further they got from the base, the more nervous she became. Her eyes kept glancing up at the sky. Still daylight, but the light pinks of sunset were starting to appear. "Malfoy, where are we -?"

"You'll see," he said, walking faster as he took his own glance up at the sky.

Before long, they exited the anti-Apparition shield that spread all the way out there from Hogwarts. Draco grabbed Ginny's wrist and Apparated them further into the forest. When they landed, Ginny smacked his arm and pulled away.

"What the hell are you doing?" she screamed. "And how did you just Apparate without a wand?"

"Because *you* have a wand, Weaselette," he said. "I just channeled your magic. It's an easy trick. Maybe if you're lucky, I'll teach it to you sometime."

Ginny began looking around. Just in front of them was a small cluster of tall trees, all forming a perfect circle. Draco walked towards it.

"Where are we?" asked Ginny, following skeptically after him.

Draco stepped through the trees, having to maneuver himself around them since they were so closely grown together. "This is called a fairy ring," he said, stepping into the center of the small clearing. It was covered in a perfect circle of pure-white snow. "They exist in the Muggle world as well, but when they grow in magical forests the trees create a sort of protective barrier around them. Only humans can enter these clearings." He paused briefly and looked at Ginny. "Or exit them."

Ginny's throat went raw as she slowly entered the clearing. Looking up, she could already make out the faint silhouette of the full moon high in the purple sky. It would only be a matter of minutes now.

"Several years ago, Fenrir Greyback went on a bit of a biting spree," said Draco. "He was turning witches and wizards into werewolves left and right, and the Dark Lor - You-Know-Who had his Death Eaters use these rings to train them into becoming our servants."

Ginny's eyes went wide as she began looking around nervously.

"But we haven't used them in years," Draco assured her. "You-Know-Who finally told Greyback no more and, of course, he had to listen. All of the other werewolves are already under our control. Or so we thought."

Ginny stopped staring at the sky and looked at Draco. She wiped at the tears in her eyes and asked, "How did you know?"

"I've been around enough werewolves to recognize the signs, Weaselette. I'm just surprised that no one else in that whole fucking place seems to have caught on. Does Potter even know?"

Ginny shook her head. "George is the only one," she said as her tears began to fall. "Everyone else just thinks I'm worn out. Which I am. I really, really am."

Ginny sunk to her knees and cried into her hands. Draco wanted to comfort her, but one look at the sky let him know there was no time.

He looked around and located a branch that had fallen into the clearing. He picked it up and waved his hand over it, turning it into a large, silver serpent. Ginny screeched as it began slithering around her.

"There's less of a chance that you'll do harm to yourself if you have a non-human companion."

Ginny nodded. "That's why I normally go to the mountains. There's a fox up there that stays with me through it all."

Draco walked into the trees and made himself comfortable on a rock that was tightly squeezed in there. He took out a cigarette and lit it. After a moment, Ginny walked over and handed him her backpack. And then her wand.

"You trust me with this?" he asked, giving it a twirl.

"I guess I don't have much of a choice," she said. She glanced up at the sky again. "Malfoy, I … I need to take off my clothes so I don't tear them."

"Go right ahead," he said. "I'm not going to look. There's only one girl I care to see naked and it definitely isn't you."

Ginny nodded, but she still moved to a spot where he could not see her and slowly began to undress, folding her clothes and putting them into a neat pile. As soon as the sound of brushing fabric stopped, Draco waved Ginny's wand and summoned her clothes to him. He carefully put them into her backpack before leaning back and taking another drag of his cigarette.

"Obviously, I can't stay all night," he said. "But I'll wait to make sure my little friend is enough for you."

The serpent slithered over to where Ginny was hiding.

"I'll come back for you in the morning."

Ginny whimpered. "Thank you, Malfoy."

Draco continued to stare up at the sky, watching as the purple became a dark blue, and then black. The moon was already high and he closed his eyes as Ginny began to scream, the horrible sound of flesh tearing as her pretty voice quickly became that of a horrible beast's.

Draco finally opened his eyes and watched as the fur covered human crawling in the center of the clearing began to form into a hideous wolf. Claws tore out of her hands, her body contorted and, before long, Ginny Weasley was no longer in front of him, just a hideous, blood-thirsty, reddish-brown wolf.

Draco sighed deeply. Until this moment, a part of him had still been hoping that he

was wrong and she was just playing him.

The wolf looked up and howled at the moon. Luckily, the barrier kept her from seeing him. Still, she ran into the trees a few times, trying to get out of them. The serpent he had created slithered forward and curved its long body around her feet. Once she noticed its presence, her thrashing stopped and Ginny seemed … almost calm.

Draco sighed in relief before putting out his cigarette, grabbing her backpack and standing up. He walked out of the trees, nearly jumping when he came face-to-face with a small fox.

"Are you the one from the mountains?" he asked, even though he was well aware the animal could not answer him. "Well, if you are, keep an eye on her for me until I get back, will you? She's important to someone I care very deeply for."

Draco looked back at the clearing one last time before using Ginny's wand to Apparate back to the edge of the barrier. He walked the long distance back to the base and hid Ginny's backpack outside before heading in.

Dinner was already long over and Draco headed straight to his room. Hermione was sitting on the bed, twirling her ring between her fingers while staring mindlessly at the comforter.

When Draco walked in, her head whipped up and she leapt towards him, stumbling as she reached the edge of the bed and pretty much falling into his arms. "Where the hell have you been?" she demanded while nuzzling into his chest. "Merlin, Draco, you're freezing."

"I had to take care of something," he said, looking over at the dresser to see that she had gotten him some food, as well as the thermos full of coffee he had requested. That was for Ginny in the morning.

"What?" she asked, pulling back so that she could look into his eyes. "Draco, you look upset. What is it?"

He shook his head before walking over to the dresser and grabbing a piece of bread. He ate it down quickly. "I have to go somewhere early in the morning. Before sunrise."

"Where?" she asked.

"I don't know if I'm allowed to tell you."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "Then you better damn well do it! There are no secrets between us, Draco!"

Draco sighed. He did want to tell her, but he understood Ginny's need to keep something like this a secret. Still, he was not sure if she realized how necessary it was to have someone who cared for you by your side while going through this. Sure, she had her brother, George. But was that really enough? Especially when he was not even here.

"Put on your cloak," ordered Draco. "I need to show you something."

Hermione's arms slackened. She blinked a few times before nodding. While she grabbed her cloak out of her bag and put it on, Draco finished the rest of his food and pocketed the thermos. Once Hermione was ready, he took her hand and guided her out of the base.

Once outside, Draco grabbed Ginny's backpack from the spot where he had hidden it and headed towards the barrier.

As they walked through the snow, Hermione went on full alert, but Draco already knew that very few creatures in the Forbidden Forest ventured to where they were going.

"Draco, where are you taking me?" she asked after a while.

"It's not something I can just tell you, Granger. You need to see."

Hermione kept quiet after that. They walked until they reached the edge of the anti-Apparition shield and then Draco used Ginny's wand to Apparate them to where they needed to be.

Hermione was about to ask how he had done that but, before she could, a loud howl shot through the air around them. She grabbed onto his arm and held on tight.

"Draco, what -"

"This way," he said, putting his arm around her and guiding her towards the fairy ring.

Hermione followed his every step to get through the thick cluster of trees. She froze when Draco stopped by a rock, her eyes immediately drawing to the wolf in the center of a clearing, running around in circles while a snake slithered at its feet.

While this wolf did not differ much from a regular wolf, Hermione knew that it was not. A smaller snout, longer hind legs, near-human eyes … a werewolf.

"Draco, who … who is that?" she whispered.

"Weaselette," he answered. "I brought her here since, in this form, she cannot escape this clearing."

Hermione's nails dug into his arm as tears flooded her eyes. "But … how?"

"I don't know the story yet," he said. "We didn't have much time."

Hermione sunk down on the rock, her eyes never leaving Ginny as she tore through the clearing. For the most part, she was fine, but every now and then she would forget about the serpent and try to escape again.

Draco sat behind Hermione, wrapping his arms around her waist and putting his chin on her shoulder while they both watched the wolf that was once her friend. About halfway through the night, Draco glanced to the side and saw the fox from before sitting on its own rock as it watched Ginny as closely as Hermione was.

The next morning, Ginny woke up, lying huddled in the center of the clearing. The snow was freezing and her entire body ached as she slowly began to lift it off of the ground. Before she knew what was happening, someone was throwing a cloak over her back and hugging it around her. She looked up to see Hermione smiling softly at her.

"Morning, Ginny."

"G-Granger … what are you -?"

"Draco thought you might want to see a kinder face than his own when you woke up in the morning."

Ginny looked behind her to see Draco standing there, holding a thermos.

"I hope you're not angry with him."

Ginny shook her head. She looked back into Hermione's eyes and immediately started crying

"It's all right," said Hermione, pulling her close and wrapping her arms tightly around her. "Everything is going to be all right, Ginny."

"No," said Ginny, frantically shaking her head. "No, it's not! Nothing is ever going to be all right!"

Hermione continued to hold the other witch as she cried in her arms. She stroked her hair and tried to sooth her as best she could, but she knew no words could make this better. Ginny was a werewolf, and there was nothing she could do but be there for her. Every step of the way.

# Chapter 36: Carry That Weight

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Draco gathered some brush for a fire while Hermione helped Ginny redress. Once she was clothed and the fire was lit, he warmed up the coffee in the thermos and handed it to her, along with her wand.

"Thanks," said Ginny, slipping her wand into her pocket and taking a long, necessary sip from the thermos. It felt good to have her insides heated up. When in her wolf form, warmth was never a problem, but the moment she turned human again the cold always hit her like a ton of bricks. It was ten times worse than if she had just been out there.

"Ginny, how … when …?" Hermione was unsure which question to ask first. It was all equally important and she wanted to know the entire story. She scooted closer to her friend and took her free hand in her own. Then she looked into her eyes and said, "Just tell me."

Draco sat down across from them and warmed his hands on the fire. If only he had not forgotten his bloody gloves.

"It happened about two and a half years ago," said Ginny. "When Greyback was on that biting rampage you were talking about, Malfoy."

"I figured," said Draco.

"He got me in a battle. It was just a graze of the teeth and I thought I would be all right. I told Bill, thinking my symptoms would just be the same as his, but he was skeptical, so he took me to the abandoned dragon facility in Romania and he chained me up. It was lucky he did because that first night was the worst. I nearly tore through chains designed to hold a two ton dragon. See?" Ginny held out her wrists so that Draco and Hermione could see the scars where the shackles had once been.

"I don't understand," said Hermione. "What exactly does Harry make of those scars, or any other ones on your body?"

"I honestly don't know what Harry thinks," said Ginny, staring vacantly into the flames. "He knows we all keep secrets from him, especially about our close calls with death. He probably just assumes I was captured once and got these then. He never asks. Not anymore. We refused to answer his questions for so long that, one day, he just stopped asking."

"He knows."

Ginny and Hermione both looked across the fire at Draco.

"What makes you so sure?" asked Hermione.

"If you were a bloody werewolf I'd know, Granger," he said. "Even if I did not recognize the signs right away, I would know something was wrong and I would do whatever it took to figure it out. As much as I hate to give Potter any sort of credit, he knows. I guarantee it."

A tear slid down Ginny's cheek as she realized the truth behind his words. If the situation had been reversed, she would have known something was wrong with Harry, and she would have found out.

"So it was Bill who always helped you?" asked Hermione, slipping her hand back into Ginny's on her lap.

Ginny looked at her and said, "Yes. For a year, we went to Romania, but then the Snatchers claimed the dragon facility as their own, so we started going up to the mountains. He would stay a good distance away and keep an eye on me, making sure I caused no harm to myself or others. Then he died …" She gulped as her eyes drew back to the flames. "I debated telling Ron but Bill's death was kind of the last straw for him. He finds a way to blame every bad thing that has ever happened to our family on himself and I didn't want to burden him further. He's suffered enough."

Draco and Hermione looked at each other. Hermione lightly shook her head. "You can't take this burden all upon yourself, Ginny. You need help. Lupin had help."

"Yes, and everyone in his life had to make sacrifices for him," said Ginny. "Maybe that's fine when the world's more or less at peace but, right now, I can't put this on anyone. The reason I chose George was because he's the only one in my family who seems even remotely happy, and even that's mainly for show. Charlie won't

do anything dangerous anymore because he wants to make sure someone will always be around to take care of Fleur and Victoire, Ron's never here because he needs to be front and center on every mission to prove himself, and my dad … my dad already feels like such a failure for losing his wife and three of his children. He can't know about this. It would destroy him."

Hermione took a deep breath. "All right. But why not Harry?"

Ginny sighed and looked down at their clasped hands. "What's the point when he is not in any condition to help me?"

"You need to tell him," Hermione said sternly.

"I can't -"

"Yes you can! He is your boyfriend and he loves you. He deserves to know."

Ginny smiled softly. "You're as bossy as ever."

"Yes I am," said Hermione. "And when we get back I will expect you to give me that notebook of yours. Even when there is no full moon, being a werewolf is exhausting. You don't need to be putting all of this extra stress on yourself."

"It's exhausting because of the nightmares," said Ginny. "It's not like you're any better when it comes to that."

"I'm getting better," said Hermione. "My real-life nightmare has ended but yours is still going."

"My real-life nightmare will never end," Ginny said gravely.

Hermione looked to Draco for help, but he truly had no idea how to make this situation any better. Other than mildly changing the subject.

"Does Greyback know you're a werewolf?"

"Yes," said Ginny, looking up at him. "Why?"

"Because one of his requirements during his rampage was that he reports all bites to You-Know-Who." Draco beamed as he realized he had said the name correctly. "If he ever found out that Greyback successfully bit Harry Potter's girlfriend and let her escape … well, it would not be good."

Ginny nodded. "Greyback always tries to capture me every time we've come into

contact. I don't know if he wants to take me in or kill me but, either way, I try and avoid him as best I can," she said. "He was with your group in Godric's Hollow. Tried to take me there, but I screamed for Ron and he got me away from him just in time."

Draco remembered her screaming. It was why he never got to finish his conversation with Weasel, though he doubted it would have done any good. Ron had already made up his mind about him.

"We should get back," said Hermione, climbing to her feet. "I'm sure Draco's and my absence has not gone unnoticed." Still holding onto Ginny's hand, she helped her up.

"Did you actually need to 'pillage' food from a village?" asked Draco as he stood.

Ginny shook her head. "No. I steal stuff from the kitchen throughout the month and then give it back like it's new."

Draco laughed. "You're deceitful enough to be a Slytherin, Weaselette."

"Thanks … I think."

"Coming from Draco's mouth, that is definitely a compliment," said Hermione with a smile.

The three of them walked out of the fairy ring with Hermione still holding tightly onto Ginny's hand. When it came to Apparating, Ginny was still feeling a bit weak so Draco was the one who ultimately had to do it. With three of them, he needed to physically have the wand this time.

"I really do want to learn that channeling magic trick," said Ginny as they continued to walk through the forest. "It seems like it would come in handy if someone disarmed and then grabbed me."

"It is," said Draco, grabbing onto Hermione's hand and claiming it as his own.

When they got back to the base, the entire place seemed deathly quiet. That is, until they started to approach the dining hall. The loud bustling of voices caused them all to look at each other.

Ginny stepped in front of them and took a deep breath before opening the door. The entire room was in chaos. The first thing she noticed was that George and Angelina were there, George holding Charlie by the collar and shaking him while shouting, "What do you mean you don't know where they are? Our little brother

and sister are both gone and you don't have a bloody clue *where*?"

Fleur and Angelina were working hard on trying to separate them while Arthur tried to talk reason from the sidelines with Victoire in his arms.

Cormac was standing on top of his usual table and making some sort of speech, his posse raising their fists every time he raised his own and shouting in agreement. Ernie grabbed his ankles and pulled him flat on his back before taking his own stance on the table, most likely contradicting whatever it was Cormac thought was so important he had to announce it. Cormac tried to get back up and attack him but Dean and Terry were holding him down. When his posse members tried to save him, Michael and Justin quickly joined in.

Harry was stuck in a corner, trying to calm Kingsley and McGonagall down as they screamed at each other. Hagrid eventually had to pick each of them up by their shoulders and put them on separate ends of the table.

"What the bloody hell is going on here?" Ginny commanded in a booming voice.

The entire room went silent as they all turned to look at her.

"Ginny!" shouted George, running over to her and immediately taking his little sister in his arms. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," he whispered into her ear so only she could hear. Of course, Draco and Hermione were close enough that they got the gist of it.

"Ms. Weasley, where have you been? What is the meaning of this?" Kingsley demanded as he marched towards her.

"What do you mean?" she asked, crossing her arms and looking at him defiantly. "We've just returned from pillaging food. The waffle demand yesterday cleaned us out of a few necessities." She opened her backpack and showed him flour, sugar and cinnamon, as well as some apples, eggs and uncooked pasta. "I don't understand what the problem is," she said. "You were all nearly rioting in here. Why?"

"McLaggen was telling everyone Malfoy and Granger took off and were going to tell our secrets to You-Know-Who!" said Ernie, taking Padma's hand so she could help him climb off of the table. "I told you all it was bloody bullshit! They're right there!"

"And just what secrets did you think we'd be revealing, Mc-Pain-In-My-Ass?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow. "I'm assuming this place has a Secret Keeper,

because it would be pretty fucking stupid if you didn't, so we are incapable of telling its location. What else could there possibly be to tell?"

"I don't know," scoffed Cormac. "Maybe Potter's bloody secret! I'm sure your *lord* would just love to hear about how he crippled him!"

"I'm fairly certain he already knows," said Draco. "Every move he makes is always perfectly calculated. Why should this have been any different?"

Hermione noticed Harry's eye light up as Draco said this. Calculated meant magic was involved, and magic being involved meant it was possibly curable. It was simple algebra.

"So you brought them with you?" asked Kingsley, looking very seriously at Ginny. "Without permission?"

Ginny shrugged. "I thought it was decided that they weren't prisoners here. The two of them have been feeling suffocated so I offered to bring them along. Simple as that."

"But you and Malfoy weren't at dinner last night and Granger was!" yelled Cormac, storming forward. "Explain that!"

Draco grunted. Fucking arse and his constant awareness of them.

"I asked her to get us some food and coffee while Weaselette filled me in on the plan," he said. "You seem to know our every move, McNarkin. Tell me, did she or did she not leave here with food and a thermos in her hands?"

Ginny lifted the thermos she was still holding.

Cormac looked at it with narrowed eyes. "A likely cover story."

Draco, Hermione and Ginny all gave exasperated looks.

"Are you serious?" said Hermione. She looked around the room to see that many of the people there really were. She groaned. "Fine. Draco and I will be your damn prisoners! We won't go anywhere again if that's what it takes to *please* you people."

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco noticed George was giving him quite the peculiar look. He tried to ignore him, but eventually he just had to return it. When their eyes locked, George stared intensely at him. He seemed to be searching for something. Probably some sort of sign that they knew the same secret, but Draco

was not giving anything away. That was Ginny's choice.

"The next time you decide to take them out, you come to me first," Kingsley said very sternly while looking at Ginny. She became as pale as a sheet.

"For the last time, Kingsley, *I* gave her permission to take them out!" shouted McGonagall, stepping forward.

Draco, Hermione and Ginny all tried to hide their looks of surprise. It was a lie, obviously, and none of them were sure why she was covering for them.

"Malfoy, were you seriously outside all night '*pillaging*'?" asked Padma as she stormed towards them. Naturally, Ernie was on her heels. "That is going *completely* against my medical advice! As a Mediwitch, you should have known better, Ginny!" she snapped. "Mr. Shacklebolt, I am going to have to request that Malfoy be relieved of his duties today. He needs bed rest to heal properly and *clearly* he has not been getting it!"

"Yes, fine," said Kingsley, waving a hand at her. "Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Granger may both be relieved of their duties. And Ms. Weasley."

Ginny looked up at him.

Kingsley took out his wand and pointed it at her. "I am going to need you to hold still."

"Kingsley, what are you doing?" demanded Harry, speaking up for the first time and slamming his fists on the table.

"Checking her for the Imperius Curse, Mr. Potter," he answered. "It is just a safety precaution."

"But aren't you the one who decided Malfoy could stay here? And *not* as a secondhand citizen. As an equal."

"I repeat. It is *just* a precaution."

"But this '*precaution*' of yours is just the sort of thing that has everyone doubting his sincerity! You knew he was defected before any of us! Andromeda told you and you have *always* held her in high regard!"

The entire room watched with wide eyes and dropped jaws as Harry spoke so passionately. Until now, he had pretty much kept his mouth shut when it came to Draco, so hearing their beloved golden boy stand up for the Death Eater was quite

the spectacle.

Kingsley glanced back at him. His wand hand slowly began to lower.

"Oh, this is bloody bullshit!" yelled Cormac. He marched forward, raised his wand to Ginny's hand and cast the spell himself.

"Hey!" shouted Draco, raising his hand and using his wandless magic to send Cormac flying backwards. "You do *not* touch my Mediwitch!"

Hermione chuckled beside him. "Always so damn possessive."

"Is she clear, Cormac?" asked one of his posse members as they and Lucy helped him to his feet.

Cormac sneered at Draco. "She's not Imperiused, but that doesn't mean he hasn't brainwashed her!"

Both Draco and Hermione rolled their eyes. "And how could I have *possibly* done that?"

"I don't know! I'm not up to date with how your sick Death Eater tricks work!"

"Ow! McLaggen! You hurt my bloody head!" shouted Ginny. She marched forward and punched him hard while clutching at her forehead.

"Yes, because you need to know what you're fucking doing before you start poking around in someone's brain," spat Draco.

Ginny punched Cormac again. "Prick!"

Draco looked over at Harry and saw that he was red in the face and glaring at Cormac. It was clear he wanted to defend his girlfriend's honor but he was not exactly in a position to do so.

"Let's get you all out of here before you start another riot," said Padma, taking Draco's and Ginny's hands. "I'll give you something for your head, Ginny."

Hermione took the food Ginny was still holding and quickly handed it off to Cormac. "You take care of this," she said before following Padma, Draco and Ginny out.

"Everyone here is always so bloody cheery in the morning," said Draco as they exited.

Several hours later, Draco sat propped up in their bed. He was watching Hermione closely as she lay sprawled out on the floor, writing notes in Ginny's notebook while simultaneously reading two books. One on potions, specifically Wolfsbane, and the other on how to become an Animagus.

"Are you seriously considering that?" asked Draco, pointing to the Animagus book.

"Yes," she answered. "Ginny's a sitting duck in that fairy ring of yours. It's too dangerous so we need to find another way to keep her under control."

"We?" he repeated while cocking an eyebrow.

"Yes, Draco. *We*. If I become an Animagus then obviously you're going to become one too."

"I wasn't aware that was an obligation of mine."

"You're the one who absolutely insisted on the title of my boyfriend," said Hermione, jotting something down in the notebook. "One would think you'd want to be with me while I wandered around with a werewolf, whether I be in human form or animal."

"No need to get snippy. You already know I'm going to do it."

Hermione glanced up at him and smirked.

Leaning over the side of the bed, Draco picked up the potions book and read over the ingredients of Wolfsbane. "This is … *a lot* of shit we don't have."

"Yes, I know," said Hermione. "Once the tension in this place dies down a bit, we're going to have to pay another visit to Hogwarts. And we'll need to get a lot of everything because we'll have to practice making the potion a few times before giving it to her. It's extremely complicated and I think even yours and my skills combined might not be enough to brew it properly."

Draco nodded. "While there, we should also visit the library."

Hermione looked up at him with excited, yet curious eyes. "What for?"

"If Potter's condition is caused by magic then there's no better place to search for a potential cure."

Hermione nodded very seriously. "Good thinking. Two birds, one stone." A huge smile suddenly formed on her face. "Wouldn't it be amazing if we *both* became birds in our Animagus forms?"

Draco chuckled. "There are worse things to be. I'll be a falcon and you'll be a finch."

Hermione's smile immediately faded. "Arse."

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Hermione slammed her Animagus book shut and hid it under the bed while Draco flipped to a different page in the potions book.

"Come in!" Hermione called while sitting up.

The door opened and Harry walked in.

Hermione beamed at him. "Hello, Harry. Is Ginny with you?" she asked while looking down at his working legs.

"I just left her, actually," he said. "She's taking a nap in my room since she seems to have not slept at all last night."

Harry looked wearisome as he stared down at the floor.

"Yes, sleep was not exactly in the cards last night," said Draco, studying Harry thoroughly as he tried to figure out if his theory about him was correct. On further assessment, he was still pretty confident that Harry knew.

"She said you're taking over her self-appointed task of running this place," said Harry, looking at Hermione.

She smiled. "Yes, well, probably best not to publicize that. We don't want any more conspiracy theories rolling around, though I am highly considering favoritism and giving me and Draco a couple room again."

"Excellent choice," said Draco. "A larger one, if they have it."

"They do," said Hermione, flipping a few pages forward in Ginny's notebook. "She has the sizes of all of the rooms listed here, as well as everyone's preferences. I guess Cormac always requests the red room. If he and that awful Lucy girl are together, wouldn't you think they would want a couple room?" she asked, looking up at Harry.

He blushed. "Uhh … well, they're not *exactly* together. It's more of an off and on thing."

Draco could not help but wonder if the 'off' just happened to coincide with nights when the Weasel was feeling a bit lonely. He shuddered at the thought.

"So, Hermy, I was wondering -"

Both Hermione's and Draco's eyes popped.

"What did you just call me?" she asked.

Harry smiled. "Hermy. The platoon George and Angelina met up with tested a few nicknames for you. Hermy does not set off the taboo. Unfortunately, the second half of your name does."

Draco frowned. So no 'Mione' then? That was much cuter than '*Hermy*'.

"So you've decided to call me Hermy? Like Grawp?"

"Who?" asked Draco.

Harry's smile grew. "That's right. It's better than Granger, at least."

"Is it though?" said Draco. He was fairly certain he was just going to stick with the familiar.

Hermione laughed. "If you like it better then go right ahead," she said, but she secretly hated it. "So what were you saying before?"

"Oh, right!" said Harry, looking down as his legs started to become a little shaky. "I was just on my way to meet Hagrid for tea before lunch, and I thought you might like to come."

Hermione's eyes lit up. But then she looked at Draco and her face immediately dropped. "Umm … I don't think I can with Draco's Healer prescribed bed rest. Maybe I can -"

"Just go, Granger," said Draco. "I am fully capable of entertaining myself for an hour while you have tea."

Hermione blinked. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," he said. "Just bring me some lunch after. Extra mayo."

Hermione crinkled her nose. "Mayonnaise kisses are *not* sexy, Draco."

He smirked. "Says you."

She stuck her tongue out at him. Then she closed her notebook, stood up and went over to the bed to give him a kiss. "I'll be back shortly. Stay out of trouble."

"Yes, Mother," he said with a smile.

Hermione rolled her eyes before following Harry out.

Since Harry's legs were not strong enough to take them all the way to Hagrid's quarters - which Hermione learned was outside and in his own smaller tent - he had brought his broom. At first, he just rode on it while Hermione walked behind him, but, somehow, he was able to convince her to climb onto the back of it. Of course, once she did he began flying a lot faster.

Harry zoomed around the base, causing Hermione to cling tightly onto his waist. She clenched her eyes shut and screamed as he sped the broom outside, flying high into the air, to the spot just below the boundary, before plummeting back towards the ground at what might as well have been a ninety degree angle.

And then Harry pulled to stop smoothly in front of a small tent. Hermione stumbled as she hurried off of the broom and took several steps away from it.

"Dammit, Harry! You *know* I hate flying!" she shouted.

Harry just laughed and said, "Sorry," but his tone indicated otherwise.

Hagrid must have heard their voices, because he walked out of his tent and immediately scooped Hermione up in his arms.

"Ugh … good to see you too, Hagrid," she said while patting his sides. He carried her inside and Harry flew in after them.

Tea was actually much more pleasant than Hermione had expected. Fang was still around. He knocked her to the ground before slobbering all over her face, and her conversation with Harry and Hagrid felt almost natural. Her talk with Harry had helped more than she ever thought possible. Everything was out in the open and he still loved her, which was all she ever wanted. She should have known better than to actually believe Harry would judge her after everything she had been through.

Even though it felt really nice to just sit and have tea with the two of them again,

Draco was never far from Hermione's mind. After an hour, she knew she had to get back to him before her anxiety kicked in. Well, kicked in further. It was manageable right now.

Harry left with her but, this time, she opted not to ride on the broom.

"So how was food pillaging last night?" he asked as they headed back towards the main tent.

"It was fine," answered Hermione while glancing sideways at him. "Why?"

"No reason," he said. "Just … curious, I guess. I was a little surprised she chose the two of you to go … 'pillaging' with."

Hermione stopped walking. "To be perfectly honest, she didn't. Draco invited himself along and … well, he actually came back and got me later. You know, after dinner."

"Oh," said Harry, stopping his flying and staring at a spot on the ground. "You mean after dark."

"I suppose that's right," said Hermione while fidgeting. She was starting to get this nervous feeling that Draco had been right. "Umm, Harry … is there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"I don't know," he said, looking up at her. "*Were* you with Ginny last night? Or did you actually go to pillage food from a village?"

Hermione sighed and fidgeted more. She was not sure if she wanted to do this but … "There was no village pillaging," she finally said. "By any of us. I was with Ginny." She paused. "Sort of."

"Oh," Harry said again. "And was she … all right?"

"No," Hermione said honestly. "You know very well that she wasn't, Harry." She sighed again. "If you know then why haven't you told her?"

"How am I supposed to tell her that when she so obviously doesn't want me to know?" he said.

"I don't think it's that she doesn't want you to know. She just … doesn't want you to think any less of her."

It was then that Hermione realized she and Ginny had the exact same fear.

Something horrible had happened to them that was beyond their control, yet they still blamed themselves and feared judgment from the people they loved the most. But Harry was not like that. His love was unconditional.

"Draco and I have encouraged her to tell you. Hopefully, she'll listen. But it wouldn't hurt for you to drop hints so that, when she does decide to tell you, she'll know it will be okay."

Harry smiled at her.

"What?" she asked, her cheeks flushing.

"Nothing, you just … sound so much like your old self right now," he said. "I don't know what it is you think is wrong with your head, but you're still the smartest person I know."

"Thank you," she said, smiling back at him. "And I meant to say it earlier, but thanks for standing up for Draco this morning. It … well, it means a lot that you're willing to trust him like that."

"Malfoy took care of my girlfriend last night," said Harry, "and he's been taking care of you for months. As much as I want to sometimes, I can't hate him. Not when he's been there for two of the most important people in my life."

Hermione's eyes became teary as she continued to gaze at him. Her smile only grew as she reached up to wipe her wet eyes on the back of her hand.

"But that doesn't mean I have to like him."

Hermione laughed. "I suppose that'll have to do." Without another word between them, Hermione stepped forward and hugged him. "I've missed you so much, Harry Potter."

Hermione felt her shoulder become damp as Harry hugged her back. "You have no idea how much I missed you."

The two stayed there hugging for a long while, not wanting to let the other go. For the first time since Hermione got there, both of them were finally starting to feel like they truly got their friend back. And it was nice. It was really, really nice.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

The next morning, Draco and Hermione woke up to a knock on their door. Both groaned since they had been up late the night before, practicing the spell to

become an Animagus while Bronson and Quigley did the same thing on the other end of the two-way mirror. For fun.

It was extremely complicated and supposedly took years to perfect, but this just would not do for Hermione. She wanted to have it down by the next full moon. While Draco admired her determination, he highly doubted that was going to happen.

Hermione stumbled out of bed and answered the door. "Padma! Is everything all right?"

"Oh, yeah, everything's fine," said Padma with a smile. "Kingsley just wanted me to check on Malfoy to see if he was healthy enough to send back into the kitchen."

Draco grunted. "I hate the kitchen. Tell him no."

"I can't lie," she said, stepping into the room. While walking over to the bed, she caught sight of the book sitting open on the dresser.

Hermione followed her eyes and quickly slammed it shut. "Just some light reading," she said.

"On Animagi?"

"Yes, I like to know about everything," said Hermione.

Padma leaned in really close. "Hermy … are you looking to become a bird?"

Hermione frowned. "Does *everyone* know that name?"

"Yes," said Padma with a smile. "They made an announcement."

Draco laughed. "You know, it's really starting to grow on -"

"Don't!" snapped Hermione. "You will stick with 'Granger' or 'Love'. Understand?"

"Well, now that you've made it forbidden, I find myself really wanting to say it."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Arse."

Unfortunately for Draco, Padma's assessment of him proved that he was just fine. His heart still had a weak spot on it but he would be fine as long as he took it easy. Meaning no more late nights outside, no more confrontations with Cormac … and no more cigarettes. She confiscated the ones Ernie had given him and, just

like the name 'Hermy', once they became forbidden he found himself craving the nicotine even more than before.

Ginny was back in the kitchen that day, as well. Cormac had not done any serious damage to her head but she had a horrible migraine for the remainder of the day. She had tried to sleep it off, but the days just after the full moon were just as difficult as the ones leading up to it.

It was actually a day off for the cleaning crew, so Hermione spent her free time with Harry. She wanted to learn the spell Ginny used on his legs, so he was teaching it to her as best he could. Originally, they had assumed that Ginny's Mediwitch training was why she had been able to perform it so well, but Padma had tried to learn it as well, to be helpful, and she was only as successful as Harry.

Harry was not allowed to ride his broom around everyone else since he was 'technically' not allowed to have it, so Hermione decided to go and grab them both lunch after an attempt to carry him failed miserably. She sped right through the dining hall and went straight to the kitchen, giving Draco a kiss before asking Ginny if she still had the book she had learned the spell from. She did and she went off to get it while Hermione put together some plates for her and Harry.

"Enjoying your time with Potter?" asked Draco as she cut her sandwiches into perfect, tea-sized triangles.

"Yes. It's nice to feel normal again," she said. "Well … as normal as we can get, anyway. He's become crippled and I just recently escaped a life of slavery. Obviously, it's not exactly the same, but I do enjoy my study time."

"I've noticed," said Draco with a smile. "Potions, Transfiguration and Charms. You're doing it all."

"Yes, I am." Hermione bit her lip. Uh oh. Draco knew that look. She was plotting, devising the best way in that pretty little head of hers to ask him something she knew he would hate. "And I was thinking we might want to bring Defence Against the Dark Arts into the mix. When Ginny said she wanted to learn that spell of yours yesterday, it got me thinking. You know so many tricks that can be used against the Death Eaters in battle. What better way to get people to trust you then by teaching everything to them? Like how you taught me."

"No," Draco said immediately.

Hermione furrowed her brow. "Why not?"

"Something like that would only make everyone here hate me more."

"No it wouldn't! They would want to learn! Maybe at first it would just be the few here that have accepted you, but I am confident that others would come around in time."

"No," he repeated.

Hermione let out a deep, wearied breath. "Please, Draco. Just … think about it. Promise me you'll think about it."

Draco looked at her and sighed. "Fine. I'll *think* about it."

"Thank you," said Hermione, taking his face in her hands and kissing him.

Ginny came back a minute later and gave her the book. Hermione disappeared with it and the lunch she had prepared for her and Harry. The moment she was gone, Draco already felt himself missing her.

"So would we call you Professor Malfoy?"

He looked over to see Hannah smiling at him.

"Just so you know, I would attend," she said, "and I think more people than you realize would be right there with me. This is a war and we all want to win."

Draco nodded before walking into the pantry, for no other reason than he wanted to be alone. He hated that even after being a complete arse, Hannah was still trying to be his friend. And Ernie's confession that she already had an inkling that Draco had killed a member of her family only made it worse.

"Malfoy, what are you hiding in here for?" asked Ginny, poking her head in.

"Just give me a minute, Weaselette."

"Why? What's -?"

"A minute," he repeated. Then he sighed. "Please."

Ginny was obviously taken aback by the gesture. "Uhh … a-all right," she said. "Take all the time you need."

She walked back out of the pantry and Draco was left alone to sulk in his own self-pity. Part of him almost wished Ron would show that list. It would be one less

burden weighing down on his heart.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Near the end of dinner, Draco went out and found Hermione sitting at what had become their usual table with Ernie, Padma and all the rest of that lot. Harry was there too and the two of them were chatting with smiles on their faces.

"Draco, you look exhausted," said Hermione as he sunk down next to her.

"Are you not feeling all right?" asked Padma, instantly going into Healer mode. "Do you have any of the symptoms -?"

"No, Patil, I'm just tired," he said.

Suddenly, the entire room went silent. Draco looked around and followed everyone's eyes to the entrance of the dining hall. He froze. The only feeling he was even conscious of was Hermione's fingers digging into his knee. Ron had just walked in. He spotted them and immediately started heading in their direction.

"About bloody time," said Cormac, stepping into his path. "Ready to show us that list?"

Ron ignored him. He pushed him out of his way and continued walking towards them. Even Harry looked nervous as he approached.

The closer Ron came, the clearer it was that his eyes were on Draco. He marched right up to the table, stared across it at him and said, "Tell me you know which fucking Death Eaters killed my brothers."

Draco noticed Hermione's head turn towards him out of the corner of his eye, but he did not dare look at her right now, knowing that her face would only make him even more nervous.

"I don't know about the one who was killed a few years back -"

"Percy -"

"- I wasn't there. But I do know the one last year -"

"Bill -"

"- Yes, him. *Bill*," repeated Draco. "He was killed by Quincy Nott." He paused and took a deep breath. He was not sure he wanted to say this next part, but it seemed

kind of important. "Eventually."

He could hear Fleur whimper from across the room.

"So it was bad for him?" asked Ron with tears in his eyes.

Draco looked over at Fleur, who was hugging tightly onto Victoire while Charlie comforted them. It seemed that the child did not understand what they were talking about and he was grateful for that, but it was only when Fleur gave him a faint nod that he felt it was right to go on.

"He was a Weasley. Of course it was bad. You-Know-Who was not about to go soft on him. He had too much to prove. But so did your brother, and he kept his mind closed. Even Nott couldn't break through his barriers, and he's the best. Which is why he got frustrated and killed him. Before that, there was actually talk of him replacing Granger as a slave."

Hermione's eyes widened as the rest of her face sunk. "You never told me that," she said in a quiet and hoarse voice.

"You knew they were considering executing you," said Draco. "Bill's presence was what initiated those talks."

While Hermione began to plummet into her own mind, Ron took a deep breath. He reached into his pocket and pulled out several folded pieces of paper. They looked pretty worn, like they had been read time and time again.

"I've thought about it," he said, "and *this* is not my place. If there's anything you want to fess up to, any person you want to relieve of the pain of not knowing, that's your call."

Without making a move, the list in Ron's hand burst into flames. Gasps and screeches could be heard around the room.

"No!" shouted Cormac, running over as Ron tossed the burning list onto the table. He extinguished the flames. "Reparo!" Nothing happened.

"That won't work," said Ron. "Those are the same flames we have used to permanently destroy everything when Death Eaters have infiltrated our bases in the past. That list is gone."

Cormac looked lost as he stared at the ashy remains of the list. He ran his fingers through it.

"Anything you want to tell McLaggen, Malfoy?"

Cormac's eyes immediately shot up and bore right into Draco.

Draco grunted. That fucking little … "I don't know, Weasel. Is there anything you want to tell Granger?"

Hermione, who had been staring dazedly at the ashes, suddenly looked up. "What did you say?" She honestly had not heard him.

Ernie yipped beside Draco. He brought his hands up to his face and tried to hide is growing blush.

Ron went white. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Come on, Weasel. Don't play dumb," said Draco. "You can't honestly look me in the eye and tell me you burnt that list out of the goodness of your heart. It's all a ploy. It's all a fucking ploy to win her back and you know it."

"N-no. It's not. I -"

"Be honest, Weasel. You'd be happy if I left, wouldn't you? Despite Granger's feelings on the matter. But nothing would satisfy *you* more than if I just stood up and walked right out of here, because you know that as long as I'm around you don't have a bloody chance of winning her back."

Ron said nothing, but his eyes spoke a thousand words as they shot cold flames in Draco's direction.

Draco gave him a crooked, joyless smirk. "I'll tell you what, Weasel. I'm going to give you a chance to get rid of me. Right here. Right now."

"Draco, what are you doing?" Hermione demanded as she leaned in close to him and clutched hard onto his arm.

If he was being perfectly honest, Draco had absolutely no clue what he was doing. All he knew was that he was angry. Ron had hit something when he burnt that list, telling Draco it would be up to him to confess any guilt. How was he supposed to do that? How could he possibly look Hannah Abbott in the eye and tell her the truth? That he had killed her grandmother. Even Cormac, someone he loathed, deserved the truth, and he did not want to be the one to have to give it to him. He did not want to be the one to tear anymore hearts apart. He had done enough of that over the years, and he was exhausted.

"Go on," said Ron through gritted teeth.

The tension was so strong that everyone else in the room was afraid to speak. Kingsley and McGonagall had stood and were slowly edging in their direction, but neither were moving as quickly as they probably should have been.

"Prove to me that you're the better wizard."

"Draco, stop," Hermione demanded beside him.

But it was too late. Draco had already gone too far into this to back out now.

"And how am I supposed to do that?" asked Ron.

"Simple," said Draco. "Look Granger in the eye and tell her again that you have waited for her all of these years. Look into those eyes," he pointed, "and tell her you have been faithful this entire time, that there has been no one else, that she was always on your fucking mind and no other girl *ever* had the privilege of -"

"Draco, stop! Stop! Just stop!" Hermione shouted while rising to her feet. "What the hell are you trying to prove?"

"Look into his eyes, Granger."

"Why? Whatever he says, you're *not* leaving."

"Look!" Draco demanded.

Hermione let out a huff and turned her head in Ron's direction so she could look into his eyes. Only she could not do it, because Ron was not looking at her. He was looking at the ashes on the table, his fists clenching and then unclenching as his eyes began to tear.

"It doesn't mean that you weren't always on my fucking mind."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "What?"

"None of them meant anything," said Ron, finally looking up at her.

Draco stole a glance at that Lucy girl as he said this. That gleam of murder in her eye that Ernie had mentioned was definitely present.

Hermione's mouth fell further as her eyes dropped down to the same spot he had just been staring at. "Wow. I … I don't even know what to say right now."

"I didn't -"

Hermione held up her hand to silence him. "I just … can't believe you had the *audacity* to give me a guilt trip about not waiting for you, while all of this time you have been gallivanting around with … with … with fucking *floozies*?"

"But I didn't -"

"You made me feel *horrible*, Ron. *Horrible* for coming here with someone else! When you have been doing the exact same thing?" Hermione's voice continually raised in pitch as she spoke. Her nostrils flared as she glared across the table at him.

"No!" said Ron, pointing a finger at her. "No, it is *not* the exact same thing! You came here in fucking love with someone else! I *never* fell in love!"

"That's worse!" shouted Hermione, her eyes ever-widening. "I wouldn't have cared if you'd fallen in love, Ron! Even if I had escaped and come here on my own! If I had shown up here and found you in love, or married, or, I don't know, the father of seven bloody children, I wouldn't have cared! Maybe I would have been a bit sad at first but I would have gotten over it! Because *you* were happy! That's *all* I want, Ron! Just for *you* to be happy!"

"But no one else has ever made me happy," said Ron, wiping a tear from his cheek.

Hermione looked sadly at him as her hands clenched around the edge of the table. "I never asked you to wait for me," she said.

"I thought our last words were a given."

Hermione gulped as she removed her eyes from his. Without a word, she stepped away from the table and started heading for the door.

"Granger, wait!" called Draco, running after her. When he reached her, he grabbed her arm, but there was no need to turn her around, because she was already whipping in his direction.

"Don't play innocent with me, Draco Malfoy!" she snapped.

He looked gravely at her. "What do you mean?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean! You never would have made an offer to just '*walk on out of here*' if you weren't already positive that you were going to win that

stupid deal. You *knew*! You knew and you didn't just tell me!"

"It wasn't my place to tell you," he said.

"Oh really? So, instead, you opted to have Ron tell me in the most humiliating way while a room full of people listened? A room full of people who are *still* listening!" she said, scanning her eyes around the dining hall. No one even tried to pretend their attention was not on them. Hermione shook her head. "Find somewhere else to sleep tonight, Draco." She turned away and began walking again.

"What?" he spat. "Where?"

"Don't know. Don't care. Perhaps you could curl up with a Hufflepuff!"

Draco moved to follow her, but his path was quickly blocked when Cormac stepped into it.

"I'm not in the mood, you prick."

"That's too bad, because I am," said Cormac, giving him a shove. "You're going to tell me every fucking name that was on that list."

"Mr. McLaggen, stand down!" shouted Kingsley, walking over to them.

Cormac lifted his wand and waved it at him. Kingsley was so surprised that he did not get the chance to block the Stunning Spell. He fell backwards. McGonagall and several other people gasped.

"Tell me the fucking names, Malfoy!" Cormac demanded while pointing his wand at Draco's throat.

"Cormac, what are you doing?" asked Hermione as she stood frozen by the door.

"I want to know the names on that list."

"No," said Draco.

Cormac's eyebrows pursed, his face distorting into a horrible grimace. "*Tell me* the names that were on that list!

"No," Draco repeated coolly. He took a step backwards.

"Tell me!" said Cormac, taking a step with him.

"Remove your wand from my neck, McLaggen."

"Tell me! *Tell me! TELL ME*!"

"FINE!" shouted Draco, veins popping out of his forehead as he stood up straight and stared right into Cormac's eyes. "Liam McLaggen was on that list! Is *that* what you wanted to know?"

Cormac grinded his teeth, his eyes becoming bloodthirsty as he lunged at Draco. He forgot all about his wand as he punched him hard in the gut.

"He was the last of my family you fucking bastard!" he cried before hitting him again, this time in the face.

Draco grabbed his wrists and wrestled Cormac off of him, but before he could back away, two of his regular posse members had his arms and were holding him still so that Cormac could hit him some more.

"Stop! STOP!" shouted Hermione, running forward and trying to intervene. But she was not even able to reach Draco before someone grabbed her and held her kicking and screaming while Cormac continued to pound his fists into Draco. "GET OFF OF ME!" she cried.

Ernie tried to run forward, but someone he did not even see hit him before he could get there. McGonagall had removed the Stunning Spell from Kingsley, but the riot had become too large and the spell she had used so successfully in the medical ward only caught a small cluster of people when she tried it here.

Dean, Terry and Michael successfully pushed through the crowd and got the two posse members off of Draco. They started fighting with them, giving Draco the freedom he needed to pounce at Cormac, hitting him back with twice the amount of strength the prick had used against him.

George finally ran in from across the room, trying to pull Cormac back while Ron pushed through and grabbed Draco.

"We are wizards! *Why* are we fighting like this?" demanded George.

Cormac, who had somehow accumulated super-human strength, pushed George off of him and said, "You're right!" He aimed his wand at Draco and shouted, "*Crucio*!"

Draco fell out of Ron's arms, writhing in pain.

"No!" shouted Padma, ducking down and climbing through a break in several

people's legs. "He's already sick, Cormac! You can't -"

"He killed my cousin! I can do whatever I fucking want! *Crucio*!"

In a heroic effort, Ernie escaped his current battle and leapt in front of Draco, taking the second Unforgiveable Curse for himself.

"Stop! Stop! STOP!" shouted Hermione, using her wandless magic to send the person holding onto her flying backwards. The crowd was too thick for her to get to Cormac, but she saw that girl, Lucy, in a heated battle with Susan just to her left, so she held out her hand and shouted, "*Expelliarmus*!"

Lucy's wand flew into her hand and Hermione used it to summon the witch to her. Then she grabbed her arm and aimed the wand directly at her heart.

"Cormac, I swear, if you do not lower your wand right now I will 'Crucio' this girl straight to hell!"

Cormac hesitated. His wand lowered slightly.

"Who fucking cares, Cormac?" shouted the posse member who had been holding Hermione as he got back on his feet. "Now that Granger's told Weasley there's no bloody hope, you know she's just going to jump back into his bed."

Hermione's mouth fell open in disgust. She found Ron standing just behind a fallen Draco, his face bright red as he avoided her gaze. "*Her*, Ron? *Really*? Out of *all* of the girls in this *whole* place, you picked this … this … *bitch*?" There was really no better word for her.

Lucy pushed Hermione off of her and stepped away. "You never deserved him!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me!" shouted Lucy. "He really did wait for you! He loves you! But you … you're just an ungrateful, Death Eater whore!"

Every last person in that room's eyes widened as their jaws fell to the floor.

Cormac's hand holding his wand dropped completely. Even he knew Lucy had gone too far.

"Did you even think about him at all while you were shagging every Death Eater in You-Know-Who's inner circle? *Plus* some!" And it seemed she was going farther.

"Shut up!" shouted Ron, his entire body bright red with anger. "Just *shut up*!"

Hermione's head sunk a little, but she refused to cry. Without a word, she stepped forward, looked Lucy straight in the eye and handed her back her wand. The other witch flinched, but she still took it.

"I won't let someone like you make me feel bad about myself," said Hermione, her mouth fallen into a horrible scowl. "I was raped by each and every one of those men. It was not my choice. So tell me, *Lucy*, how many men have you had in *your* bed over the past four and a half years? Because, judging from what I've seen of you, I wouldn't be surprised to find that your number was far greater than mine. And only one of us was forced."

Hermione smirked wickedly at the stunned girl before walking through the crowd, pushing everyone aside until she reached Draco. She kneeled down beside him and took his beaten face in her hands, finally letting herself whimper.

"Let's get you out of here," she said, taking his arm and perching it around her shoulders.

"Does this mean you're going to let me sleep in our room?" asked Draco with a bloody smile.

Hermione both chuckled and sobbed at the same time.

Padma hurried over to Ernie and pulled him to his feet. She dragged him along and the two of them followed Draco and Hermione. Somehow, she got the feeling that a lot of Healing Spells were going to be needed tonight.

**Okay, so I don't normally do this, but while writing the conversation between Hermione and Ron in the dining hall the song 'Calm My Soul' by Paper Route came onto my playlist and the ambiance just fit. Don't know why, but go ahead and give it a listen if you'd like. Around the time he says "But no one else has ever made me happy." It literally started playing the second I wrote that line and it gave me chills. The good kind, obviously. :o)**

# Chapter 37: In My Life

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Draco lay in the bed, watching through a small crack in his eyes as Hermione shuffled around their room.

"Granger, what are you doing?" he asked in a weak voice.

She did not answer. When she picked up her book on Animagi, she whimpered before throwing it into her bag, followed by the book on potions.

There was a knock on the door. Hermione ignored it.

"Aren't you going to answer that?"

Nothing.

"Granger …"

Hermione's eyes clenched shut as her fingers pressed into the edge of the dresser. She took a deep breath to compose herself before going over and answering the door.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, but Draco could not see who it was.

"I …" Weasel. "I wanted to apologize for earlier. I -"

"It doesn't matter," said Hermione, pulling the door against her side and refusing him entry.

"But you need to know. About Lucy … she -"

"I really don't want to hear this story, Ron. And if you for one second try to tell me she's not *that* bad -"

"I would never. She's bloody horrible. Always has been. But she liked me and I knew I could never get attached to someone like her."

Hermione shuddered. "You know I was serious when I said I really didn't want to hear this story, right?"

Ron nodded. "I … I brought you something." He looked off to the side and patted his leg. A moment later, a large, ginger cat with a squashed head walked into the doorway. It looked up at Hermione and meowed.

"Crookshanks!" she shouted while reaching down and taking her cat in her arms. She struggled a bit to lift the heavy creature, but managed to get him up all right. "Oh, I've missed you!" Crookshanks purred loudly as Hermione nuzzled her head against his. "Where have you been keeping him?" she asked.

"At one of our other bases," answered Ron. "One with families who don't want to be sent on missions."

Hermione began rocking her cat back and forth, turning enough so that Draco got a clear view of the large animal.

"What the bloody hell is that?"

Hermione turned. She blinked a few times before smiling. "It's my cat."

"*That's* a cat?" he asked.

Crookshanks and Draco locked eyes. The mutual dislike was instantaneous.

Hermione rolled her eyes, squeezing Crookshanks tighter as he growled in her arms. "*Of course* it's a cat, Draco. What did you think?"

Draco shrugged. "Lion cub?"

Hermione was just about to say something in return when she suddenly stopped and looked down at her cat. Her eyes sank as she started to scratch the top of his head. "It was very sweet of you to get him for me, Ron, but I'm afraid I can't keep him."

"Why not?" he asked from the doorway.

"Because Draco and I are leaving," she answered with a sigh.

Ron's eyes widened. "What?"

"We can't stay here, Ron. Not with Cormac and his lackeys on the loose. The moment Draco is feeling better, we're leaving this place, and I don't expect we'll ever be back."

"But … Cormac can be kept under control."

"He stunned Kingsley without a second thought," said Hermione.

"But surely a few punches are better than the suicide you would be committing by going back out there!"

"It's not just that," she said, turning back towards him. "Draco's heart is weak, Ron." She leaned in and whispered, "In more ways than one. You understand?"

Ron gulped before nodding slowly.

Hermione nodded back. "Goodnight, Ron." She tried to shut the door, but he put his foot in the way.

"But I need to talk to you."

"About what?" she asked.

"About everything," said Ron. "Please, Hermy …"

Hermione groaned. *That* name. "With my leaving, I don't think that's a good idea. It would be better if you just … kept thinking of me as being the same person as before. It's -"

"Granger, get over here."

"Not now, Draco!" she said, snapping her head in his direction and giving him a clear view of the tears in her eyes.

"Yes *now*. Come here," he ordered.

"No, I - Draco, stop!"

Draco had begun to climb out of the bed. Hermione ran over to him. She threw her

cat onto the bed and pushed him back down.

"Padma said to stay in bed! What are you doing?" she cried.

Draco grabbed her hands and pulled her close. "We're not going anywhere."

"W-what?" she asked as a few tears dripped down her cheeks.

"We're not going back out there," he said. "Weasel's right, it's bloody suicide. I am not about to let a prick like McLaggen scare us away from here. Besides, his attack today was slightly justified." He smirked.

Hermione laughed through her tears. "Slightly?"

"All right. Completely." Draco's smirk faded. "Go talk to Weasel."

"But I promised you I wouldn't be alone -"

"Well, I'm taking it back," he said, giving her cheek a stroke with the backs of his fingers. "Go. I'll be here when you get back."

Hermione nodded and gave him a kiss. "Take care of Crookshanks for me."

Draco and the cat looked at each other. It seemed to understand what she had said and neither of them liked it. Both groaned in very similar manners.

Hermione gave her cat one last pat before walking back towards the door. "It seems that I may be available to talk after all," she said to Ron as she walked into the hallway and shut the door. "But my room is currently a bit crowded. Maybe we could go outside for some fresh air."

Ron nodded and led the way.

Hermione crossed her arms and looked around nervously as they walked. Ron had his hands in his pockets and seemed very intrigued with an ongoing lump in the passing wall.

When they got outside, several people were smoking out there. They all stopped their chatter when they saw Ron and Hermione, and watched them closely. Ron continued right past all of them and did not stop walking until they had reached the training grounds.

He stepped through the trees and stopped by a well-sized rock, propping himself against it while Hermione stood in front of him.

She stared down at the ground and fidgeted with her hands, unsure of where they were supposed to start. With Harry, it had been easy. He had wanted to know everything and the words just flowed. She spoke of her capture and everything that happened after. Where she lived, the horrible places they kept her. The names of the Death Eaters who always seemed to choose her over the others. What they had done to her once they had her. What they had done *with* her once they had her.

But when it came to Ron, she knew she could not speak to him like that. So freely. She could not tell him everything. Harry blamed himself for not winning against Voldemort and creating that domino effect that left so many of his friends damaged or destroyed. But Ron … he blamed himself for everything that had happened to her, and solely her. His guilt was too strong and she did not know how much she could reveal without pushing him over the edge.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say," she finally admitted after several minutes of silence. "I know you want me to talk about Draco but -"

"This isn't about him anymore," said Ron. "I'm not an idiot. I can see he's not the evil bastard I always figured he was. He's still a prick but I … I can't hate him when he's the one who brought you back to us." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "This is about you and me. I want to fix this. I …" He gulped. "I want to go back to the way things were. Before the war, when we were friends."

Several tears dripped down Ron's cheeks as he continued to keep his eyes close.

Hermione sighed deeply. She took a step forward and grabbed Ron's hands in hers. This was it. Their moment. And Hermione did not want to be ashamed anymore.

"If that's true, then I need you to understand who I am now. You need to know what happened to me and you need to accept it."

Ron's hands tensed in hers.

"I know Harry has talked to you, and I'm sure Ginny has as well. But, even after my confession earlier, I still get the feeling you're lying to yourself about what actually happened to me."

Ron's face twisted in pain. He moved his head so it was no longer facing her, but still kept his eyes tightly shut.

"Ron, look at me."

He shook his head.

"Ron … please. Open your eyes and look at me."

He shook his head again. "I … I can't. Not if you're going to say it."

"I'm not going to say anything until you look at me."

He turned his head further.

"Ron …"

He whimpered.

"Ron!"

His head moved further away.

"Ron, look at me!"

Hermione grabbed his face and forced it to point in her direction. Ron slowly began to open his eyes. When his blues met her ambers, he finally relaxed beneath her touch.

Hermione took a deep breath as she focused hard on keeping his gaze. "I was raped."

"No." Ron tried to turn away again but she held him in place. "No! No, I can't! I -"

"But you need to!" shouted Hermione, putting her thumbs under his eyes in an attempt to keep them open and looking at her. "You need to understand what happened to me!"

Ron calmed slightly as she began to stroke his cheeks.

"I was raped," she repeated. "I haven't said it much out loud but it's true. I was raped almost every day for over four years. Sometimes by just one person time and time again. Other times, a whole group of them would have their way with me, beating me as they did it, not caring how much I hurt or cried or screamed for them to stop. My first time was like that. It was mere hours after you and I separated, and I remember every detail of that night like it was just yesterday. The smells, the sounds, the looks on their faces as they took something I had treasured so dearly away from me."

A tear slid down Hermione's cheek. Ron whimpered but she did not care. He needed to know. So she kept going.

"In the beginning, I would always fight back. But, somewhere along the way, I realized that this was exactly what they wanted. They got off on me struggling. So I stopped and I took it. I accepted it and *that* is what killed me." Hermione glanced away for a moment and choked back a sob. She looked back at him with wet eyes and said, "I died during my time as a slave, Ron. Not physically, but mentally I had lost everything that made me who I was. My spirit was gone, my fight was gone. I just wanted it to be over. I let myself waste away and just waited for the day I would die physically as well. If I hadn't gotten out, even if they decided against executing me, I am certain I would already be gone. I was so close to the end and I felt relief in knowing my suffering would soon be over."

Hermione's grip tightened on Ron's face. He lifted his hands and put them on her waist, squeezing her sides as he forced his eyes to stay focused on hers.

"But then I was given a chance," she continued. "An old woman took pity on me and gave me what I needed to get free. It was then that I realized I didn't want to die. I wanted to live. I wanted to find you and Harry and be happy again, and it was finally in my grasp."

The tears finally spilled over Hermione's eyes as she relived her escape. She used one hand to wipe her cheeks while the other dropped to Ron's shoulder.

"But once I was free, there was nowhere for me to go. I tried to get out of the city but there were too many obstacles in my way. Then, by some miraculous twist of fate, I ended up on the same street corner as Draco Malfoy."

Ron's grip on her tightened.

"He saved me, Ron. He protected me from the Death Eaters, he took me home and he saved me," she said. "Obviously, my feelings for him didn't happen right away. He's Draco Malfoy and I'm not an idiot." She chuckled halfheartedly. "But, over time, something shifted and I began to see him differently. This love I feel for him, it isn't just because he's my savior, despite what you might think, and it isn't just because he was there. It's because he understands."

Ron's eyes started to drift, but Hermione grabbed his chin and lifted it upward.

"As a Death Eater, he already knew everything I went through without me having to tell him, and he used that to get me talking about it, to stop being so ashamed of myself over something that was out of my control," she said with a whimper. "On

nights when I wake up from my nightmares, terrified that I'm back in a basement or a broom closet or wherever it was they decided to keep me, he just holds me and lets me cry. He listens to me without fear or judgment as I tell him what horrible things my mind will never let me forget. He loves me, Ron. I know it's hard to believe, but he really, truly loves me."

"I do believe it …" Ron said weakly.

Hermione nodded. "I know you might think the feelings I have for him are all just because he was there, but it's not. If you had been the one to find me and nurse me back to health, I think we still would have discovered that what we had before simply isn't there anymore. I'm not the same person I was all of those years ago, Ron, and neither are you. This war, it's ... It's changed us. And I'm sorry, but I just don't think you could ever have given me what I needed. Even now, you can barely look at me."

Ron blinked his eyes several times, letting her know that he still trying hard to look at her, and not through her.

Hermione lifted a hand and stroked his cheek again. "You want to pretend like everything that happened to me simply doesn't exist, but it does, and it's part of me now. *He's* part of me now. And if he dies in this war I will die right along with him, because he is the only thing holding me together. Without him, I might as well be back in some Death Eaters' home, just closing my eyes and waiting for it to be over. I was nothing and now, because of him, I am something again. Please don't take that away from me. I want you back in my life but I won't sacrifice him to get it."

Hermione sobbed as Ron's grip on her tightened. His eyes began to clench as the tears continued to pour down his cheeks.

"I thought about you every day we were apart," said Hermione. "Please … please don't tell me I'm going to lose you now when I just got you back."

"You'll never lose me," Ron choked out, his entire body shaking as his arms wrapped all the way around her waist. "But I just … I need to know if you're right. About it … *us* not being the same."

Hermione gulped.

"Please … just once. Please just let me see," he pleaded, his eyes desperate as they continued to bore into hers.

Hermione gave the faintest of nods. Ron closed his eyes and leaned in slowly. His body did not steady until his lips met hers, and then he became still, serene as he relished in the familiar feeling of holding her against him.

Hermione's eyes clenched shut. Her lips did not respond, but her heart raced just as it had that last day when they finally admitted that they loved each other. Their love had been innocent, just like they were, just like this kiss. But the days of their innocence were long gone, and it had never been more evident than in that moment as their lack of passion and heart kept it from becoming more.

Ron whimpered as he pulled away, slowly, unsurely. It was gone. Not all of their love, but *that* love had disappeared forever. War had separated them, changed them, and ultimately torn them apart. His arms slackened as he continued to sob.

Hermione wiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered before kissing his cheek and running away.

Hermione's hand lifted and wrapped around the ring dangling from her neck as she headed back inside. Now, more than ever, she wanted to find the man she did love. She wanted to hold him and kiss him and be with him from now until the day she died. Until the moment Ron had kissed her, she had not realized she had doubted her own feelings. He had saved her. He was her hero. But what she felt … it was so, so much more than that. Hermione Granger loved Draco Malfoy. She knew that now without the slightest hint of doubt. He was her one and she was going to love him until the day her heart stopped beating.

<p align="center">XXX</p>

Draco sat upright in bed while Crookshanks lay on the pillow beside him. He was attempting to read about the spell Ginny used on Harry's legs, though his eyes kept drifting back to the door. It was not a pleasant feeling knowing the girl you intended to marry was off alone with the boy she had never actually fallen out of love with. Hermione and Ron had never had their closure. She had always intended to go back to him. That is, until she fell for Draco. But just because she developed stronger feelings for someone else did not mean that the other ones were not still there buried somewhere.

Looking back to his text, Draco could not help but feel there was something familiar about this spell that he was unable to decipher. He was pretty sure he had read about it before, but not in this book, and not in such few words. It was not a familiarity like he knew the spell or anything, just that he knew about it. Or at least one like it.

Draco held out his hand and tried to summon Hermione's bag to him, but his body was weak and it only rattled a bit. He heard a strange sound and turned to see Crookshanks watching him, appearing almost smug as he did so. Draco stared at the cat curiously. It really was the strangest fucking animal.

Looking back at the bag, Draco sighed and slowly stood up. He went over to the bag and dug through it until he found a book on magical properties. He had read through it once before, and it seemed like the right kind of book for this familiar feeling he was having.

But, before he could start reading it, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he called as he headed back towards the bed.

The door opened slowly and Ernie poked his head in. "Don't get back in," he said as he stepped inside and shut the door behind him. "Padma actually wants you walking around so your joints don't stiffen."

"Oh." Well so much for reading. Draco tossed the books onto the bed. "So what am I supposed to do exactly? Just pace?"

"Well, you *are* free to leave this room," said Ernie, holding out his hands and presenting the door like it was an award.

"Then why did you shut it?"

Ernie looked back at the door and stared at it inquisitively. "You know, I don't know. Probably so the people walking by don't hear me bitch you out!" he said, turning his eyes back on Draco.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Bitch me out. For what?"

"You promised me, Malfoy. You *promised* me you weren't going to say anything about Ron! And what did you do?"

"Technically, I didn't say -"

"There are no fucking technicalities here!" shouted Ernie. "Everyone knows it was me! I *told* you Ron was my mate!"

Draco crossed his arms. "Then why did you tell me -?"

"I don't fucking know why! It started out as an accident but then I just kept bloody talking! Verbal diarrhea, you know? It's a real problem of mine!"

Draco bit his cheek and stared down at the floor.

"Are you not even going to apologize?" asked Ernie. "Because I'm giving you a big window here!"

Draco said nothing.

Ernie sighed. "You know, Malfoy, things are never going to get better for you around here if you keep pushing everyone away. Do you have any idea how hard you've made it for me to try and be your friend? I know you think less of me because I was a *Hufflepuff* or whatever," he rolled his eyes, "but it's not like anyone from my house thought Slytherin was cream of the crop either."

Draco looked up at him.

"I honestly don't know what goes through that head of yours. Maybe you believe you should be continually punished for all of the crap you've done, and you probably do, but *maybe* you should leave the punishing up to the people you've wronged instead of all of this self-loathing shit."

"Like McLacking-Any-Common-Decency?"

Ernie snickered. "I do love your names for him. But yes, I believe his punches, at least the first two, were justified. The Cruciatus Curse though … well, seeing as it's unforgiveable and he did it out in the open like that, *and* in front of children, I don't think that was justified. And neither does Kingsley. It's a good thing McLaggen took off because I'm pretty sure he'd already be in the process of getting kicked out. If he's smart he'll stay gone for a few days to give Kingsley and McGonagall time to cool off."

Draco nodded and stared vacantly at the floor. While a part of him really wanted that pain in his arse kicked out, he did not feel right sending anyone out into Voldemort's corrupted world. They could always send him to another base but, from what he understood, this one was where the fighters were, and no one could deny that McLaggen was a fighter. If he would just stay out of his fucking way for once …

"And one more thing."

Draco looked up at Ernie

"*Stop* telling yourself that you don't deserve Granger, because I know you do" he said. "That girl's been through hell and back, and she gets to be with whoever she

wants no matter how wrong they are for her. Got it?"

Draco smirked and nodded.

"Good. Now, go for your walk." Ernie opened the door and held it for him.

Looking down, Draco realized he was in his pajamas. He quickly slid into some boots of his and threw on his cloak before walking towards the door. He stopped beside Ernie. While continuing to stare straight ahead, he said, "Thanks, by the way. For taking that curse for me."

Ernie's mouth fell open. He blinked, and then he blinked again, until finally he was beaming at him. "Did Draco Malfoy really just thank me? No one's *ever* going to believe this!"

"All the more reason why you should probably keep your mouth shut about it," said Draco. He finally looked at Ernie and smirked. "Tell Patil thanks too."

"For what?"

"For making up some bullshit excuse so I don't have to sit in here all night."

"Yeah, well, when we saw Granger walking with Ron, we figured you would be feeling more suffocated than ever," he said, giving him a smirk in return.

Draco nodded before walking out the door. Luckily, it was late enough that the halls were fairly empty, but there were still a few people lingering around and he eventually found himself heading outside, even though he had no cigarettes to occupy his time out there.

Of course, when Draco got outside, several people were sitting around, smoking a pipe while they talking animatedly about everything that had happened that night. They all went silent when Draco walked out, one girl even gasping.

Draco grunted before looking around. He had no interest in going back inside and it seemed the only place around with even the remotest amount of privacy was the training grounds. So he headed there.

When Draco got to the clearing, he walked to the center of it and let out an exasperated sigh. Ernie was not wrong. He was pushing people away. It was easier than the alternative. Many of these people would never accept him. But enough of them … the ones like Ernie did not deserve his cruel treatment. If Draco had tried to befriend someone as cold as him, he was pretty sure he would have given up by now. He did not understand why -

Something snapped.

Draco whipped towards the noise. He spotted someone sitting on a rock just to the left of where he had come in. After a few blinks, he could see it was Ron. He had just moved his foot and must have stepped on a twig or something.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" shouted Draco. "The one time, the one *bloody* time I come all the way out to this place, and here you fucking are!" Honestly, what *were* the chances? "This is so bloody - Wait! Where's Granger?"

Ron moved his shoulders slightly, which Draco assumed to be his half-assed attempt to shrug.

"Don't tell me you wasted this fucking opportunity I gave you?" said Draco, edging closer to him. "Because you're not getting another."

Ron raised his eyebrows slightly as he finally looked up at him.

"Why aren't you talking?" asked Draco. "Where are those horribly executed comebacks you've been throwing at me since we were in school?"

Ron blinked.

"Really? Nothing?"

Draco did not like this silence. Hermione was not here with him, and judging by Ron's depressive state, it had not gone as planned. If he would just relinquish his feelings for her and go back to the friends they once where then they could all get on with -

"I kissed her."

Draco's jaw clenched, his teeth pressing so hard into each other that they just might crack. "What?" he asked, hoping he had heard incorrectly.

"I kissed her," Ron repeated.

There was a brief moment where Draco could swear that he left his body. It was like he was standing beside himself as all life drained out of him. His body was hot, his head light, and he did not even feel his fists form or one swing forward and hit Ron hard in the jaw. He fell backwards off the rock.

"Fucking hell, Malfoy!" shouted Ron as he scrambled back to his feet.

Draco returned to himself, but the heat he felt did not cease. "Did she kiss back?" he muttered between deep, angry breaths.

"What?" asked Ron, clutching at his face.

"DID SHE KISS BACK?" he repeated, much louder this time.

Ron stared at him blankly.

"FUCKING ANSWER ME, WEASEL!"

Ron shook his head frantically. "No, she didn't."

Relief instantly washed over Draco and he soon found himself crying. He turned away from Ron and wiped at his eyes, trying hard to suck them back.

"What would you do if she had?" asked Ron.

Draco took a moment to compose himself. Then he said, "I would leave. I'm only here because she asked me to be. If she doesn't want me anymore then there's no reason for me to be endangering her life by staying." He paused. "Are you going to change your answer now?"

"No," Ron said weakly. "I'm not a liar, Malfoy. She didn't kiss back. And even if she had it just …" He gulped. "It wasn't like it was before. It was wrong. It …"

Draco turned around to find Ron whimpering into his hands.

"We're not the same," said Ron, using the back of his arm to wipe the tears off of his cheeks. Too much has happened, too much has changed us. We … we can never go back. Maybe if life had been simple it could have worked, but not like this. Not as these people we've become."

Draco took a deep breath. "You understand that now?"

"I've understood that since that first night!" shouted Ron. "Since I saw her screaming during her nightmare, I knew it would never be right! Because that's not the girl I knew! That I fell for!"

"Then why have you been trying to sabotage us?"

"Because I wanted it to be her! I wanted her to be as she once was so that maybe I could get there too!"

"That's pretty fucking selfish," said Draco.

"Says the king of self-centeredness!" spat Ron. "You just … you don't understand, all right? You don't know what you took from me by coming back here with her!"

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Took from you?"

"Yes," said Ron. He closed his eyes and put his hands on the rock, using it to brace himself. "Holding out hope for her … searching for her … believing that if she came back here everything could just be normal again is the only thing that kept me going. I've …" He sobbed. "I've lost three brothers. I've lost my mum. My dad has to force himself out of bed each morning and my sister is a *fucking WEREWOLF*! What she and I once had is the only thing I had left to hold on to … knowing she was out there and waiting for me was the only thing that kept me going each day …"

Draco's jaw dropped. "You know about your sister?"

"Of course I know," said Ron, looking back up at him. "You think in two and a half years I wouldn't notice her acting strangely each month? But she won't confide in me, because she thinks she's the one who's supposed to be protecting me. But she's not. I'm older. I should be doing the protecting."

Draco smirked. "You Weasleys and your fucking hero complexes," he said. "I don't know much about siblings, but from the little I've gathered about functional families, you're *supposed* to be protecting each other."

Ron's fingers pressed hard into the rock. "I followed you, you know? When you went off with her. I knew George wasn't back and I wasn't sure what she planned to do. Then she showed up with you and I didn't know what to think. I followed you until you Apparated, but then I had to sniff you out. When I found you, she had already changed and was in that weird tree circle."

"Sniffed us out," repeated Draco, his mind instantly going to Hermione's book on Animagi. His eyes widened. "The fox. That was you?"

Ron nodded. "As soon as I found out about Ginny, I went to McGonagall. Told her everything. She taught me how to do it so that someone could always be there for her, whether she knew it or not."

The two of them were silent for a moment, the only sound being that of a light breeze whistling through the trees. If Draco listened close enough, he could still hear the people talking by the entrance. He turned towards them. There was an

additional one now. That Lucy girl. He instantly scowled. How he hated that bitch.

"It wasn't a ploy, you know?"

Draco turned back to Ron and blinked his eyes several times to regain focus.

"Burning the list," said Ron, just in case Draco did not know what he was talking about. "I did it because you helped my sister. And I … I don't know what I was thinking when I put you on the spot like that with McLaggen. But when I see you with her it just brings out this … this *anger*." Ron lifted his hands and clenched his fingers around the air. "People are always telling me that I'm too angry, and I'm starting to think they're right." He sighed. "I didn't mean for him to 'Crucio' you. I know you're still recovering."

"You care about my health?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow.

"No," Ron said honestly. "I care about Hermy's happiness."

They were both silent again for a long moment and Draco could not help but think about how a cigarette would make this conversation so much more bearable. He still wanted to kill Ron for kissing his girl but, at the same time, he understood the need to hold onto a piece of your past. After all, for years his only motivation for getting up in the morning was the memories of his mother and the need he had to avenge her.

"She said I could never have given her what she needed …"

Draco's eyes focused again and he saw that Ron was looking very seriously at him.

"I want to see."

"See what?" asked Draco.

"I want to see what she was like when you first found her. I want to see your memories," said Ron.

"Don't you think you should be asking her -?"

"No!" he snapped. "I want to see yours."

Draco pursed his eyebrows. "Why?"

"Because I know I'm going to breakdown," said Ron, gulping again to relieve his

dry throat. "And I … I don't want her to see me like that. I don't want to upset her anymore." He closed his eyes. "But I need to see. I need to understand what it was like for her. To know that I really couldn't have given her what she needed. I … I need that closure, Malfoy." His eyes shot back open and he looked right at him. "Please."

Draco grunted as his leg began to shake. Well damn. "So … how do you want to do this?" he asked. "Do you know Legilimency or something?"

"No," said Ron, shaking his head. "But we can break into Kingsley and McGonagall's office and use their Pensieve."

Draco grunted again. "I'm already on thin ice, Weasel. I can't be breaking into -"

"We won't get caught," said Ron. "I do it all the time. Normally to steal firewhiskey, though, since they keep it all locked up in there." He paused. "And the last time I did, I saw that contract Kingsley made you sign. He won't be kicking you out no matter what you do. Not with that insurance."

And, yet, another grunt.

"You shouldn't have signed that," said Ron.

"I didn't really have much of a choice now, did I?"

"You always have a choice."

Ron started walking back to the base and Draco reluctantly followed him. At first, he was moving rather quickly, but the moment they left the safety of the trees, his pace slowed drastically.

"Ron!"

He stopped dead as that Lucy girl ran up to him.

"Are you all right? No one's heard from you since everything happened in the …" Her voice trailed off as Draco stepped up beside him. "What are you doing with *him*?" she asked with disdain.

"Move along, little girl. We're busy," said Draco, motioning for her to leave.

Lucy sneered at him before looking back at Ron with wide, doe eyes.

"You heard him. We're busy," said Ron. "Now get lost."

Ron tried to walk around her, but she stepped back into his path.

"But, I … I thought the two of us could go somewhere and talk. It's been a long time since we've -"

"I heard your boyfriend's missing," Draco interrupted. "Shouldn't you be out looking for him?"

"I don't have a boyfriend!" snapped Lucy. "Ron, you know I don't!"

"I really don't care either way," said Ron, trying to walk around again. And then there she was, stepping in front of him. *Again.*

"So that's it then?" she asked with tears in her eyes. "You're just going to pretend like we were nothing?"

"We *were* nothing, Lucy. Now get out of my way."

Lucy's nostrils flared. "Where are you off to so quickly? To share *her* with him like a million Death Eaters before you?"

Ron's brows furrowed as his face turned bright red.

Draco's fists clenched tight and he had to stop himself from swinging one at her. "*Oh*, you are so lucky I would never hit a woman," he said.

"Get out of my way you insensitive, self-involved bitch," said Ron through clenched teeth.

Lucy's tears spilled over. Ron shoved his shoulder hard into hers as he finally stepped forward.

She grabbed for his arm. "Ron, I'm sor -"

"Don't touch me!" shouted Ron, pulling away.

Draco smirked at her and winked before following him. The other people sitting outside all looked like they were on the verge of laughter, but most held it in. Not all though.

Ron walked through the halls of the base in silence, a look of determination on his face that only seemed to be growing the closer they got to the Pensieve.

When they reached Kingsley and McGonagall's office, Ron used a spell to detect

if there was any movement in there. It was completely still. He unlocked the door with his wand and quietly stepped inside.

The moment the door was shut behind them, he put up a Silencing Charm on both Kingsley's and McGonagall's doors. Then he went to the secret cabinet and took out the Pensieve.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Draco, watching closely as Ron stared into the silver basin.

Without lifting his eyes, Ron nodded slowly. "Yes, I … I need to see. I need to know if I really never could have been the right one for her."

Draco sighed and stepped forward. "I'm only going to show you the first two nights," he said, holding out his hand.

Ron handed Draco his wand and he used it to extract the memories in thin, silver strings of light. He put them into the Pensieve and watched closely as they swirled around.

Ron took a deep breath … and went in.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

It was very late when Draco finally found himself standing outside of his and Hermione's door, hoping she would not be angry for his long absence. After Ron had come out of the Pensieve, he had broken down, and call Draco a softy, but he just did not feel right leaving right then. So they broke into the cabinet with the firewhiskey and had a drink. Or several.

"I don't think I could have done what you did," Ron had said. "Looked at her without flinching. Getting her talking like that." He paused for a long moment and stared vacantly at the half-empty bottle in his hands. "I don't want her to feel ashamed about what happened to her. She did nothing wrong." He rubbed at his eyes. "I know I haven't been helping. I've been selfish since the moment she got here. Do you think she'll forgive me?"

"Probably," Draco had said. He grabbed the bottle from him and took a swig. "If you noticed, one of the first things she asked me about was you and Potter. She wants you back just as much as you want her."

Ron nodded. "I'm going to try. I swear I am this time." He grabbed the bottle back. "But maybe with the aid of firewhiskey at first."

They had laughed then. Drinking with Weasel had not been quite as terrible as Draco had expected, though he doubted a friendship was around the corner. And as much as he hated the idea of Ron hanging around Hermione, he secretly did hope he followed through with his promise to try.

Draco took a deep breath before opening the door. Even though it was late, the light was still on. Hermione was lying on top of the comforter on the bed, the books he had left there open and sprawled out while the large cat slept by her side. Her eyes were closed, but the moment she heard the door, she popped up.

"Draco!"

He shut the door, took off his cloak and shoes, and walked over to her.

"I went looking for you," she said as he approached. "Padma told me she gave you permission to go for a walk so I came back here and waited."

Hermione bit her lip as he sat down beside to her. He thought it was strange that she had not asked where he had been immediately, since that tended to be her go-to. But then she looked at him with watery eyes and gulped.

"Ron kissed me," she said in a weak voice. "I told him he could. But I didn't kiss back! I swear I -"

Draco put a finger on her lips and said, "Shh. It's fine, Granger. I already know."

"You already know?" she asked, removing his finger. "How?"

"Weasel told me." Hermione turned red with anger, but before she could burst out with it, Draco added, "Don't worry, it wasn't out of spite. He really was just telling me."

"When did you talk to him?"

"Just after you did, probably," he said. "I went outside for some air and I found him out there. Gave him a pretty good punch when he told me what he did and, for once, he didn't attack back. Kind of a nice break from the norm."

"Have you been with him -?"

"This entire time? Yes."

"You smell like firewhiskey."

Draco smirked. "Turns out, he knows where they keep the hidden stash."

Hermione crinkled her forehead. "I'm confused. What … are you two like, friends now or something?"

"Fuck no!" Draco said with a laugh. "But we've come to an understanding. You're mine and he *understands* that."

Hermione tried hard to fight back a smirk. "Arse."

Draco leaned forward and kissed her. "These are mine too," he said as he pressed his forehead against hers. He took a deep breath. "He asked me to see my memories of when I first found you."

Hermione's breath hitched.

"I showed him."

She released her breath and slowly nodded against him. "It's probably better this way," she said.

Hermione frowned and looked off to the side.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I need to tell you something. Something I realized after he kissed me."

Draco pulled away, his blood draining from his face and heart.

"I had doubts," she said, looking back at him. "About us."

He could already feel the tears building behind his eyes.

"I think everyone constantly questioning the sincerity of my feelings for you must have burrowed into my mind somehow." Hermione took a deep breath. "But I don't have doubts anymore."

Draco's eyes lit up.

"The moment he kissed me, I knew this could never be right. No kiss could ever be right unless it's from you." Hermione cupped his face in her hands. "I love you, Draco Malfoy," she said with the utmost sincerity. "And not just because you saved me. I love you because of who you are and how you make me feel. I know you think you're selfish when it comes to me, but you're not. You always put me first.

You protect me. And you love me. That's all I could ever ask for."

Draco's hands moved to her waist. He clutched onto her while she pulled his face closer to hers.

"I am a stronger person because of you, and I'm not ashamed anymore. What happened to me is part of who I am now, and I won't let those Death Eater bastards win by letting it weaken me. No more tears, no more guilt, no more looking away when I feel like everyone is judging me."

Draco smiled. "Sounds like a plan."

"And I know you'll help me keep that confidence," said Hermione while stroking his cheek. "We are going to make each other stronger, we are going to win this war, and we are going to get married when it is over. None of this 'if we both survive' bullshit. We *will* both survive."

Draco laughed. He pulled her that last half-an-inch towards him and kissed her. "Sounds like a plan," he said. "But I think we need to figure out what we're going to do about Potter before we go winning any wars."

"About that," said Hermione, pulling away and picking up the book he had taken out of her bag. "What possessed you to grab this book?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't know, but when I was reading that spell Weaselette uses on Potter's legs, something seemed familiar about it. I thought it might be in that book, but I never got the chance to look."

"Well, the spell's not in this book, but *this* is." She held out a passage to him and let him read the title. *Sanamor (Loves Healing Magic)*. "There are Healing Spells out there meant solely for magical injuries. They are called Sanamor Spells and they are best cast by those closest to the injured."

"Meaning those in love," said Draco. "Like Weaselette."

Hermione smiled. "That's right. Padma could never perform it properly because she does not have strong feelings for Harry. And as for him … well, after failing to defeat You-Know-Who, I don't think he likes himself very much, let alone *loves* himself, so he can't perform it either."

Draco's face lit up.

"Now, I don't want us to be getting too excited just yet," she said. "It is just a theory and, since I love Harry, I want to give it a try first and see if it works."

"You should make Weasel learn it too. If he can do it then your theory is all but proven!"

Hermione playfully hit his shoulder. "Arse."

Draco picked up both books and tossed them onto the floor. Hermione gasped, and was about to lecture him on the treatment of literature when he grabbed her into his arms and kissed her passionately.

"We'll figure that out tomorrow," he said, moving her back onto the bed. "Tonight there is no Potter. Just you and me."

"Draco, you're still injured," she said, giving him a light shove.

"Then just let me kiss you," he said, positioning them better and moving so he was beside her instead of on top of her. He pulled away for a moment and looked into her eyes. "I want to seize every moment I have with you since I know I'm going to have to start sharing you with the other men in your life. Wait … boys. Boys is better. I'm the only man."

Hermione laughed and kissed him again. "Just this," she breathed into his mouth.

She began to move on top of him, but when Draco rolled a bit, there was a loud hiss and a growl as he hit something soft that apparently was not a pillow.

"Oh! We're so sorry Crookshanks!" Hermione screamed, leaving Draco to check on her cat.

"You really let your cat sleep on the bed?" asked Draco. "I thought animals were confined to the floor."

"*Our* cat, Draco," said Hermione as she stroked Crookshanks. "We're getting married, remember? What's mine is yours, future hubby, and *our* cat gets to sleep wherever he wants."

Draco and Crookshanks looked at each other. Both let out loud groans of disapproval.

"Just bloody great," he muttered. And he was pretty sure if the cat could talk, it would be saying the exact same thing.

# Chapter 38: All Together Now

**A/N: So I just got my copy of _The Cuckoo's Calling_ and plan to go into hibernation mode. Happy reading!**

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"Hey, Gideon. How's it going, mate?"

Bronson leaned onto the counter, only half-looking at the wizard in front of him. He was in the second compartment on the left of the back coach on the Hogwarts Express, and he always liked to have a good look around in here.

"Uhh … Bronson. You're sooner than expected," said the wizard behind the counter.

Bronson did not notice as he reached into his pocket and flicked his wand.

"Been a stressful week," he said.

"No Quigley?"

"He's off buying other shit. Could I get half a dozen packs today? That should hold us over for a week. Maybe." Bronson chuckled.

"Umm … no, actually, you can't."

Bronson's face dropped, his lip quivering as he gave the man a look similar to that of someone who had just run over a kitten. "What?" he asked, his voice cracking in heartbreak.

"Sorry, mate, but with You-Know-Who cracking down even worse than before, my source on the outside is having a hell of a time getting in."

"So you don't have _anything_?" Bronson asked.

"Nope. Just sold the last two packs, actually."

"You mean you have _other_ customers?"

"That's right," said a vaguely familiar woman's voice from behind him.

Bronson turned. He was immediately met with the smiling face of Pansy Parkinson. She had two packs of cigarettes in her hands and held them up on display for him.

"Good to see you again, Bronson. And thanks for letting me know he was here, Gideon!" she said, stretching to the side so she could see the wizard standing behind him.

"Don't mention it!"

Bronson whipped back towards him, his jaw dropping into a dramatic 'o' shape.

"Sorry, mate, but she's hotter than you."

"That's debatable," Bronson and Pansy said together.

"So how do you smoke these things, anyway?"

Bronson turned back towards Pansy, just in time to see her take out a cigarette and put it in her mouth the wrong way. She lifted her wand to light it.

"Don't waste the nicotine!" he shouted, running forward and grabbing the cigarette out of her mouth.

Pansy smirked. "That one's a freebie. But if you want the rest of these then you're going to have to come with me."

Bronson grunted before tearing the two packs out of her hands. "Lead the way then."

"That was easy," she said, walking out of the compartment. "No fight?"

"Not if you make it quick," said Bronson. "Our 'mutual *friend*' may have said it's all right if I trust you."

Pansy froze. "You spoke to him?"

"No, I'm bloody psychic."

Pansy rolled her eyes. She grabbed Bronson's arm and practically tossed him into the next compartment over, making sure to shut the door behind them. "We're back!" she called.

A pretty blonde girl who had been sitting on the counter looked up at them with a wide grin. "Oh ho ho! Is this *him*?" she asked with a snicker.

"Sure is," said Pansy, glancing sideways at Bronson. Now they both snickered.

"Him who?" asked a dark-skinned man as he walked out from what appeared to be

a hidden door in the floor.

"Draco and Granger's friend, Sweetie," said the blonde girl, puckering her lips and demanding a kiss.

The man still seemed suspicious, but he gave it to her all the same.

Bronson and Pansy both cringed.

"Bronson, the two disgusting people sucking face in front of us are Blaise and Daphne Zabini. Former friends of Draco's."

"I hate the way you say former," said Blaise, crinkling his nose at her. "He was calling me by my name at the end there."

"Aw, Baby, don't make that pouty face," said Daphne, giving him another kiss.

"Could you two please stop repulsing our guest!" snapped Pansy.

"Sorry!" they both said with wide, innocent smiles.

"They're worse than bloody Malfoy and Cupcake," muttered Bronson. He put the first cigarette he had taken in his mouth. Before he could light it, Daphne picked something up from the counter and tossed it to him. A Muggle lighter.

"In case they actually start checking your wand, you might want to use that," she said.

Bronson nodded and lit up. He took a drag before asking, "So what do you want with me exactly?"

"A camaraderie," said Blaise. "Our lives are at a greater risk now than ever before, and the more people we have on our side the better. Pansy is our source on the inside, but she is only allowed so much access. She is no Draco. So we need to keep in contact, that way when things go south we can help each other."

"What about my flatmate?" asked Bronson. "How come you haven't tried to make contact with him?"

"You've been more accessible," said Pansy. She and Daphne snickered again. "But the less people who know about me the better. Unless you've already told him -"

"I haven't."

Pansy smiled. "Good. Now, you said you've talked to Draco?"

"Pansy, no!" said Blaise in a sharp voice. "We've already agreed that if he has any information on Draco and Granger you can't hear about it. We don't want Lucius finding anything if he decides to go wandering through your head again, let alone You-Know-Who."

Pansy sighed and said, "Yes, I know. I just want to know if he's -"

"They're *both* fine," said Bronson.

"I was getting to asking about Granger," said Pansy with a blush.

Daphne crossed her arms. "No need to be snippy!"

Bronson groaned and began scanning his eyes around the curious compartment so he would not have to look at anyone. He much preferred his usual trio of comrades, not including Quigley, of course. As his oldest mate, he was irreplaceable. But these three … well, Blaise and Daphne were no Draco and Hermione, and Pansy was *definitely* no Theo. How he missed that cute little -

"So Draco told us about his aunt and the others hiding out in the city," said Blaise. "He asked that we get them out if we can, and Daph and I would like to meet them so we can see what exactly it is we're dealing with."

"But we can't exactly just show up and knock on the door," said Daphne. "So we were hoping you could take us by and introduce us."

"You're really doing all of this out of the goodness of your heart?" asked Bronson, finally stopping his eyes on Blaise and Daphne.

"Is that really so unbelievable?" asked Daphne.

Bronson cocked an eyebrow.

"Seventy percent goodness," said Blaise. "Thirty percent for how much money we're going to make Draco give us the next time we see him."

Bronson stared at him blankly for a moment. Blaise kept smiling at him, though he was starting to wonder if perhaps he did not get that he was joking. Partially.

Finally, Bronson's face softened and he chuckled. "Cupcake and I knew where he hid his Galleons so we used to take them from him all the time. Have to admit, it feels pretty good when you can buy whatever the fuck you want."

Blaise's eyes lit up. "Are any still -?"

"Nope," said Bronson, taking another drag of his cigarette. "Went up there and cleaned him out. If you want me to buy you something pretty then you're going to have to work for it." He winked.

Blaise stared at him curiously for a moment. Then his eyes went wide as he let out an "Oh!" He finally got it.

"You know, Baby," said Daphne, "we did once talk about how much fun it would be if we invited someone to join -"

"Fuck no! This is the exact opposite of what we talked about, Daphne!" shouted Blaise, his eyes going even wider. He looked at Bronson. "No offense."

"None taken," said Bronson. "I'm sort of stuck on someone as it is."

Pansy and Daphne let out a loud, "Aww." Blaise was still clueless.

Suddenly, Pansy's head dropped to look at her left arm. She pulled back her sleeve.

"Pansy, what's wrong?" asked Daphne.

"The Dark Lord is summoning us," she said. "In the middle of the day. He *never* summons us in the middle of the day."

The entire room went silent.

"Well … go!" ordered Blaise. "And take this so you can contact us after." He tossed her a pocket-sized mirror. "I fixed it to include our new comrade." He then tossed a similar one to Bronson. "Just open it and say '*Cogita*'. The connecting ones will then heat up in our pockets. There are mirrors on both sides so we can all communicate at once."

"Nifty," said Bronson, giving it a toss before putting it in his pocket.

Without another word, Pansy left the compartment. The Black Market was all the way on the other side of town from the Dark Lord's residence, so she would really have to hurry.

She rushed out of the train and off of Platform 9 ¾. She exited King's Cross Station through a hidden passage in the wall that took her into a nearby alley. A pub with a Floo was just a few blocks away, so she headed straight there.

When Pansy arrived at the manor, she was happy to find that she was not the last one there. Several people scurried in after her, including Quincy Nott. The two scowled at each other before heading into the conference room.

Pansy took her new seat next to Theo, who was already sitting there with his arms crossed. "What do you think this is about?" he asked.

"Dunno," she said. Then her heart sank. *Draco.* She gulped. "You don't think …"

"Guess we'll find out," said Theo.

Pansy glanced sideways at him. While his voice was cold, his eyes looked fearful. She still could not figure him out, but at least he still seemed to care for Draco, if nothing else. "Suck it back, Theo," she whispered.

Theo blinked his eyes, vanishing any signs that he might be concerned for his friend.

Rodolphus and Bellatrix were the last two to enter the conference room. She took her usual seat next to the Dark Lord's chair while he took his on the other side of Pansy. It was unclear why Voldemort moved him so far up when he had been doing nothing but making mistakes lately, but no one dared question it.

Once the last person was seated, a door in the back of the room opened and Voldemort entered. He glided towards the table, his feet barely seeming to touch the floor. His eyes drifted to Theo, and then Pansy. He did not trust them, which was why he was keeping them closer than he ever had before. But, to be fair, he did not trust anyone anymore. Not after Draco's betrayal.

Voldemort took his seat and carefully folded his hands in front of him. Not even a breath could be heard around the room as everyone waited on the edge of their seats for him to continue. Pansy's eyes drifted down the table to Lucius. The two shared a nervous look before breaking contact.

"Before we get started, Rodolphus, will you please update us on your progress for the task I have given you."

Rodolphus cleared his throat. "There is little information on Baldric Bronson and Zander Quigley before your reign, my Lord."

Pansy tried to hide her surprise. She had never heard of such a task.

"They both attended Hogwarts and were in Hufflepuff, but they were about three years ahead of Draco and …" He gulped. "… the Mudblood, so it is doubtful they

knew them back then."

"Who chose their place of residence when they applied for citizenship here?"

"Draco did, my Lord."

"And tell me, Rodolphus. Do you not find that suspicious? That someone as private as Draco would choose two people he did not know to reside in his place of residence with him?"

Rodolphus blushed. "I … I do, my Lord. But there is no indication -"

"Then look *harder*," Voldemort said in a low hiss. "He chose them for a reason, and your place in my circle depends on you finding out why."

Bellatrix's heavily-lidded eyes gazed across the table at her husband, her chest heaving as she silently gave him her own threat.

"Now, on to more important matters," said Voldemort. "Stuart, you may come in now!"

Pansy stared at the opening door in shock. She had barely seen her father lately since he was one of the main Death Eaters sent out to search for Draco. But if he was back …

Stuart Parkinson walked into the room holding one end of a golden rope, which Pansy immediately recognized. It was used to prevent anyone it bound from using magic, whether it be with a wand or without one. And then attached to the other end were … Pansy's heart stopped. The room was so silent she could hear Theo stop his breathing beside her. On the other end of that rope were two people. Draco and Hermione.

"You can relax everyone, it is not them," said Stuart, waving his wand and sending the two people flying onto the table. Their landing was very rough and both screeched out in pain. "I fought against this Draco lookalike and his style was completely wrong."

"And when did this battle first commence?" asked Voldemort.

"Roughly fifty minutes ago, my Lord. It should only be a matter of moments before they revert back to their true form."

Pansy was not sure whether she should be relieved or horrified. If these two strangers proved to be members of the resistance, which they undoubtedly were,

then the Dark Lord would know Draco and Hermione had found them, and it would only be a matter of time before he struck up some sort of deal to get Draco back.

Pansy watched closely as the two prisoners sat in the center of the table. The Hermione lookalike turned and caught her eye. She gulped, seeming to be pleading with her silently. Did she know her? She doubted it, but it was possible they had gone to school together.

Stuart had not been wrong about the time. It was only another minute before the two of their bodies were morphing, the girl becoming shorter and her hair darker while the boy's blond hair became more corn-colored and he grew a good inch or two. Pansy's eyes widened. She did know them. The boy was her year and the girl she was pretty certain was older, but she remembered her from the Gryffindor Quidditch team. A Chaser.

"Theodore, Pansy, Gregory, Astoria. Will you all stand," ordered the Dark Lord.

They did as they were instructed.

"These two look to be around your age." He waved his hand. Both the boy and girl were lifted off of the table by their necks, their hands clutching at the empty air as their feet kicked frantically. "Do any of you know them?"

No one spoke up. Pansy took a deep breath. "The boy, my Lord. He was in my year. A Ravenclaw."

"A name?"

Pansy searched her memory. "Goldstein I believe. Anthony Goldstein."

"Hmm."

Voldemort waved his hand again and the boy collapsed back onto the table. He only took a moment to catch his breath before he was grabbing for the girl's feet, trying to hold her so she would not just be hanging there. But it was no use. The more he tried, the higher she rose.

"And the girl?"

Pansy scrunched up her face and tried hard to remember. The girl was turning blue and she knew she did not have much time to come up with an answer. "She was a Gryffindor, perhaps a year or two older. But her name, I … I can't …"

"Bell," said Theo suddenly. "Katie Bell. She played Quidditch."

Voldemort nodded in approval and motioned for them to sit. He waved his hand again. Katie fell hard onto the table and grabbed at her throat. Several bruises in the shape of fingerprints were already forming. The Dark Lord only gave her a moment before both she and Anthony were sent flying into the air again, this time just levitating, their arms and legs spread eagle as their backs arched slightly.

"Dear guests, if you will please enlighten us as to why it is you so rudely decided to take on the forms of the wizard and witch we are seeking?" Voldemort asked as he gazed up at the floating prisoners with his snake-like eyes.

"We were not given a reason!" shouted Anthony. "We were just following -"

"Anthony, shut up!" demanded Katie. "Don't tell them anything! Nothing we say will convince this cruel monster to spare us!"

Voldemort stared at her for a moment before breaking into unnerving laughter. All of his Death Eaters joined in, as they always did, and Pansy found herself wondering if he ever realized how fake and forced it sounded.

"She is right," he said. "Quincy, if you will."

"Yes, my Lord," said Quincy Nott, stepping onto the table and pointing his wand at Anthony. "*Legilimens*!"

Everyone waited a moment before Quincy started blinking again. "He is not lying, my Lord. They have been traveling for months, first seeking hidden Muggles, then spreading the Mudblood's tabooed name to capture Snatchers. Only a few days ago were they given a letter and some hairs by one of the Weasley's. Kingsley Shacklebolt's signature was on it. He gave the order."

"How impressive that Shacklebolt has both of you so tightly wrapped around his finger you'll follow orders blindly," said Bellatrix. "Were you not even curious as to *why* he wanted you to take on the forms of a Death Eater and Harry Potter's missing Mudblood?"

Neither answered.

"There were others with them, my Lord," said Stuart. "Hiding in the shadows. But, even when invisible, they were no match for us. I captured one and sent him off with a message for the resistance. Someone will be meeting me at the entrance to the Hogwarts grounds at midnight. I figured you would want to bargain with them. Perhaps the return of these two for the others we are seeking."

"I could care less about the return of the Mudblood," said Voldemort, turning his head slightly towards Rodolphus. The other wizard was good about hiding his reaction, but Pansy was close enough to feel his hands shaking underneath the table. "We only need one. Was the female, *Katie* -"

Katie winced as he drawled her name with his snake-like tongue.

He smiled wickedly. "Was she the one in charge?"

"Yes, my Lord," said Stuart.

"So her worth is greater. Theodore."

Theo stood up once more.

"Dispose of the other."

Theo looked up at Anthony, who appeared to be on the verge of tears. He slowly began to raise his wand.

"Stop!" shouted Katie. "I am the leader of this platoon! This is my failure! If anyone should die it is me!"

"I see," said Voldemort, leaning forward on his elbows and propping his chin up with his pointer fingers. "And why is that?"

"A good captain always goes down with their ship," she spat, her cold eyes boring into him.

Voldemort smiled and laughed again. Everyone joined in. Except Theo. His eyes were still trained on Anthony.

"And that, my dear, is exactly why we will be sparing you. I rather like your fire. Perhaps when this is all said and done, and I have who I want back in my grasp, you will consider joining us."

"I would rather die a slow and painful death you sick, twisted -"

"I do not need your permission. Just ask Sage over there." Voldemort motioned to a woman at the end of the table. A former resistance member he had Imperiused three years earlier when she had shown him quite the same fire as Katie. "Theo, please carry on."

Theo raised his wand again. Anthony began to whimper.

"Anthony, stay strong!" Katie said beside him, even though her tears had finally broken through her tough façade.

Without another moment of hesitation, Theo furrowed his brow and shouted, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Voldemort released his spell, letting Katie and Anthony collapse back onto the table. Without a second thought, she crawled over and took his head in her lap, crying as she leaned down and whispered, "I am sorry I failed you."

"I will need someone to keep an eye on our dear Katie here while we are awaiting further instructions," said Voldemort. "Are there any -?"

Before anyone had a chance to raise their hands - Quincy especially salivating as he looked the girl over - Lucius stood up and said, "I will, my Lord."

Voldemort raised his eyebrows. "You, Lucius? But you have not taken any of the women I have offered you since -"

"All pathetic, bubbling idiots, my Lord. You met my late wife. I thrive on that fire."

"Very well," said Voldemort with a smile. "She is yours."

Lucius bowed. "Thank you, my Lord." He stepped forward and slashed the magical rope so Katie and Anthony were no longer attached. She screamed as he pulled it, dragging her to him and tossing her over his shoulder.

"Everyone else is dismissed."

Theo ran out of there so quickly that Pansy did not even get a chance to corner him and make sure he was all right. She wanted to follow him, but one look from Lucius and she knew he expected her to help him take care of the burden he had just saved from a harsh ravaging. *Great*. Now how was she supposed to let Bronson know to warn Draco of the trouble that was to come?

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"AH! It worked, it worked, it worked!" squealed Hermione.

She and Ginny jumped up and down in joy as Harry walked around the room, just as strongly as if Ginny had cast the spell herself. Luna stood up and joined them. The three witches were still dancing around when the spell faded and Harry collapsed back onto his bed.

"All right, Draco, now you give it a try," ordered Hermione, handing him Ginny's wand, which she had borrowed.

"Why am I trying this again?" he asked, standing up from his spot on the floor and walking towards Harry.

"Because you don't love him," explained Hermione. "So if it works then our theory is disproven. But if it doesn't …"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," said Draco, narrowing his eyes as he looked down at Harry's legs.

Hermione laughed. "Now, Draco, I know you don't like failure, but at least this will prove once and for all that your loathing for Harry is nothing but pure."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say, Love." He pointed the wand and cast the spell, a string of white light leaving the tip and entering Harry's legs. As expected, Harry was able to stand, but he did not get very far after that.

"I think you love me even less than I love myself," said Harry as he collapsed back onto the bed. It was meant as a joke but, with his current crowd, it fell short. Only Draco snorted.

"You know, I feel really bad that I don't love you," said Ernie, who was sitting cross-legged beside the spot Draco once again occupied. "I hope this doesn't put a damper on our friendship."

"It's fine, Ernie," said Harry with a smile. "At least I was able to make a lap around the room, so you must like me all right."

"It's kind of twisted, isn't it?" said Draco. "Being able to decipher just how much people like you. We could make a list. Weaselette, Granger, Lovegood, Mack, Patil, Potter, that rugged and sexy beast, also known as Draco Malf -"

"Draco!" snapped Hermione. "This is neither the place nor time to toot your own bloody horn!"

"At least I know you'd be at the top of my list."

Hermione tried to hold her firm face, but she eventually broke and smiled. "Damn you," she said, sinking down beside Draco and letting him pull her close. Crookshanks immediately left his spot on the bed and climbed into her lap, making sure to kick his legs into Draco's side. And the competition was on! Draco grabbed the cat's hind legs and pulled the back of his body off of her. Crookshanks hissed.

"Draco, stop being mean to him," said Hermione, picking up Crookshanks and placing him properly on her lap. The cat looked at him smugly. Draco sneered in return.

"Ron, it's your turn," said Ginny as she grabbed Harry's hand and rubbed it between hers. She gazed into his eyes and smiled nervously. "This is it. If Ron can do it then that pretty much proves magic is involved with your paralysis."

"Probably a piece of You-Know-Who's Killing Curse still clinging to your spine," explained Draco. It was not unheard of.

"No pressure or anything," said Ron, standing up from the chair he was sitting in. "And what is this 'pretty much'? Do you all really have such little confidence that I would be able to do this even if he wasn't my best mate?"

Silence all around.

"Well, it's just …" Hermione started, but then she bit her lip. What was the best way to explain? "Some people are … *better* at certain types of magic. And Healing Magic … well, it's not exactly your specialty. I mean …"

"Probably best to just shut your mouth, Love," Draco whispered into her ear. Hermione did just that.

Ron grunted before approaching Harry. He took a deep breath and pointed his wand at Harry's legs. His eyes clenched shut as he began casting the spell, the same string of white light emerging and then vanishing. When it was over he opened one eye slowly, and then the other.

"Well?" he asked.

Harry took several deep breaths before standing. He walked across the room. Everyone smiled. Then he walked back. Their smiles grew. And then, for dramatic effect, he began running laps.

"Bloody showoff," Draco muttered while everyone else hollered and clapped joyously. Ernie whistled and Padma followed suit. Ginny, Hermione and Luna all began to cry.

"This is real! This is real!" Ginny shouted as she stood up and took her boyfriend into her arms. "Hope!"

"I will take that as being directed at us," said Draco, pulling Hermione closer.

This time, everyone laughed, only to be disrupted by a knock on the door. Ron went over and answered it.

"George. What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Malfoy. Have you seen him?" said George on the other side.

Ron opened the door wider and motioned to where Draco was sitting on the floor.

"Kingsley's asking for you," he said. "I'm supposed to bring you to his office immediately."

"Me?" said Draco, all life draining out of him. "*Just* me?"

"Yes," said George.

Hermione turned to Draco and took his hand in hers. "I'll come with you," she said.

"But Kingsley said -"

"Then I'll wait outside!" said Hermione, her head snapping back in George's direction. She moved Crookshanks off of her lap and stood up, pulling Draco with her. "We'll be back shortly."

The two of them followed George through the halls silently. It was only a couple of turns before they got to Kingsley's door. But, before opening it, George turned and held out his hands to stop them.

"Hold on, Malfoy. There's something I need to say first."

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Go on."

George crossed his arms and stared off to the side. "Look, I never got the chance to … to thank you for helping my sister the other night. I tried to get back, I swear I did! I even ended up blabbing her secret to Angelina so she would understand why we couldn't stop and rest, but the platoon was so much farther than we expected and Snatchers were swarming all over the area. I underestimated how much You-Know-Who wants you back." He closed his eyes and sighed. "I suspect the two of you already know that she sat down with my family and Harry last night and told them everything."

"We do," said Hermione.

"She said the two of you encouraged her to do that. It was hard but I think our

family is stronger because of it. My father seems more alive than he has in a long time. So just … thanks. For all of it." George finally looked at Draco, and then he offered his hand.

Draco slowly lifted his own and they shook. Something he definitely never thought he would be doing with a Weasley. The two nodded at each other before releasing.

George went over to the door and knocked. He waited for Kingsley's voice to give permission before opening it. "I have Malfoy, Sir."

"Yes, send him in."

George looked back and motioned for Draco to enter.

Draco turned to Hermione and kissed her cheek before reluctantly letting go of her hand. From the moment George had said his name earlier, he greatly feared that something had happened and it was time for him to follow through with that contract. But he was not ready yet. Not to leave Hermione. Not to die. None of it.

As Draco entered the room, the door shut behind him. Kingsley was sitting behind his desk and McGonagall was in a chair beside him. Someone was sitting on the other side and, when they turned he could see it was Cormac. Relief immediately washed over him.

"Please, take a seat, Mr. Malfoy," said Kingsley, motioning to the empty chair beside Cormac.

Draco slowly walked over and sat down.

"Mr. McLaggen has just returned to our facility, and we were discussing proper punishment."

Draco glanced sideways at Cormac. The wizard looked terribly pale, dark circles surrounding his eyes as he hunched in his chair. His arms were crossed and his eyes were glazed over. He did not look well.

"While stunning me has taken away any outside privileges of his, as well as his wand," Kingsley motioned to the wand resting on his desk, "it is his use of the Cruciatus Curse that has us considering his removal from the base."

Draco's jaw clenched. "You're not planning on sending him out -?"

"Heavens no!" said McGonagall. "We are not so cruel as to banish someone

entirely. This punishment would simply require Mr. McLaggen to relocate to one of our less active bases."

Cormac clenched his eyes shut and took a deep breath. "Please, don't make me leave," he pleaded. "I joined the resistance to fight."

"Yes, and you have been doing quite a bit of that as of late," said Kingsley. "Unfortunately, it's been against your own side."

"He killed my cousin!" he shouted, his eyes snapping back open.

Kingsley frowned. "We are aware of Mr. Malfoy's sketchy past, but he is on our side now and we must respect him as we would anyone else around here. The Cruciatus Curse is *unacceptable*, Mr. McLaggen, no matter how much you dislike the person you are casting it on. Understood?"

Cormac's face tensed. He let out a heavy, heated breath and nodded.

"It is your call, Mr. Malfoy," said Kingsley, looking back at Draco. "If you wish to press charges against Mr. McLaggen then he will be removed from the base immediately. But, if not, then -"

"I'm not pressing charges," said Draco before Kingsley could even finish.

Both Kingsley and McGonagall looked taken aback.

"Why not?" she asked, pursing her eyebrows.

Draco shrugged. "Well, he's an arse, I admit it, but I'm called one by my girlfriend at least twice a day so I can't exactly hold that against him. And, like he said, he's a fighter, and fighter's need to be where the action is."

Cormac's mouth dropped. His head turned slightly towards Draco.

Draco smirked. "Of course, this is a onetime pardon. Do it again and I won't hesitate to say the word and get you kicked right out of here."

Kingsley raised his eyebrows. "Well then. Is that understood, Mr. McLaggen?"

Cormac looked at him and nodded slowly.

"Then the two of you are free to go. I will let you know when I decide it is all right for you to have your wand back, Mr. McLaggen, but I would not be holding my breath if I were you."

Draco and Cormac both stood and headed for the door.

"Is everything all right?" asked Hermione, who was on full alert as Draco exited.

He nodded. "Yes, Love, just peachy."

Cormac pushed past him, knocking Draco into Hermione. She balanced him.

"Just do me a favor, Malfoy, and stay out of my way," he spat before heading down the hallway.

"Yeah, *you're welcome*!" Draco shouted after him. "Bloody prick."

"Cormac's back?" asked Hermione as she stared after him.

"Looks like it," said Draco. "And wandless, which gives me the upper hand." He smirked at her.

Hermione smirked back. "Arse."

And there it was again. That brought today's count to four. Twice as many as usual. Draco was doing well. Maybe he could get in a fifth before bed -

Both of their heads began searching around as the sound of several people running, along with some heaving breathing could be heard echoing down the hallways. Three people turned the corner, two wizards and a witch, and ran towards Kingsley's door in a panic, all of their eyes slightly drifting in their direction.

"Kingsley! Mistress McGonagall! Something terrible has happened!" the wizard in the lead shouted. The last person slammed the door behind them.

"I wonder what that's about," said Hermione.

Draco shrugged. "Not our concern." He pulled her close and began kissing on her neck. "So what do you say, Love? Shall we slip in a quick shag before returning to your precious Potter? Our room is presently cat free."

Hermione giggled as his lips moved to her ear. She had been the one to make the rule about not shagging in front of Crookshanks, but, she had to admit, she was starting to regret it. "It would have to be *really* quick," she said.

"Got it," said Draco, grabbing her hand and practically running towards their room. Although, he already did not plan on making it as quick as she expected. Once he

got her going, time would become all but lost to them. It always did.

XXX

Bronson hurried into the alley just outside of the restaurant he worked at for his break. He lit up a cigarette even though he knew he should be saving them. Gideon had not been lying about the two packs Pansy gave him being the last ones and, in good conscience, he had given one to Quigley. Damn him and his need to be fair.

The rain was coming down pretty heavily, and Bronson leaned against the wall to avoid it as best he could. A streak of lightning shot through the sky, followed by loud thunder. He immediately thought of Hermione. It was sort of surprising how much he missed her. And Draco.

Bronson had not had many people in his life he could trust, including his own family. Which is why the few friendships he had were so important. Sure, many people liked him because he had been born with quite a nice face, but sometimes it was hard to differentiate between the genuine people and the shallow ones. Quigley was genuine. Hermione was genuine. Dammit, even Malfoy was genuine. And Theo …

Bronson's ears went on full alert. He could have sworn he heard a whimper that sounded just like …

A pair of legs stretched out from the other side of the dumpster before disappearing again. Bronson knew those ridiculously shiny shoes anywhere.

"Theo!" he called, walking right into the rain and going around the dumpster.

Sure enough, Theo was sitting against the wall with his hood up. He was soaking wet and shivering, his arms wrapped tightly around him as he struggled to keep himself warm.

"Theo, what's wrong?" asked Bronson, falling to his knees in front of him.

"I … I don't know why I'm here …" said Theo through blue, quivering lips.

Bronson reached out and put his hands on his shoulders, letting them fall until his fingertips were grazing against Theo's. "What's happened?" Suddenly, his pocket began to burn. The mirror. He ignored it.

Theo gulped. He sucked back tears as his teeth began to chatter. "I just killed someone," he said. "I went to school with him. I didn't know him well but I still knew

him." He closed his eyes. "How many lives do I have to take before I'm passed the point of no return?"

Bronson sighed deeply before reaching out and wiping Theo's tears with his thumb. "I don't know. But you're not there yet, Theo. I promise -"

Theo hit his hand away. He opened his eyes. "I just told you I killed someone. You should be repulsed by me. *Why* are you comforting me?"

"Because you're not bad." Bronson reached out and touched his cheek again. "Despite what you might think, you're a good person." His pocket burned hotter. It felt like it was scorching him, but he ignored the pain. This was the worst possible time for this.

Theo hit his hand away again. "No, I'm not!" he shouted while rising to his feet. "I am bad! I'm a murderer! A thief! The son of a rapist! And I'm fucking selfish!"

Bronson stood up with him. "No you're not!"

"Yes I am!" he cried. "I shouldn't be here!"

"Then why are you here, Theo?" asked Bronson, reaching down and taking his hand.

Theo stared down at their entwined fingers. His eyes clenched again, causing several tears to drip down his cheeks. "Because I didn't know where else to go." Without another word, he leaned in and kissed Bronson softly. "I'm sorry," he whispered, "but I can't see you *ever* again."

Without looking back, Theo took off running down the alley, his cloak clinging to him as the rain hit him hard.

"Theo!" Bronson wanted to run after him, but once Theo turned to corner, he knew he could not. It was too dangerous. For both of them. His pocket burned hotter. "Dammit!" he shouted before pulling the mirror out of his pocket and flipping it open. "*Cogita*!" Three faces appeared. "What do you want?"

"Draco's in trouble!" Pansy said immediately. "You need to warn him that the Dark Lord knows he's with the resistance! They're going to make a trade for him! They can't -"

Bronson closed his eyes and grunted. "I can't warn him," he said while massaging the bridge of his nose. "Not for another three nights. They won't be checking -"

"But you have to try!" shouted Blaise from the frame he and Daphne were squeezing their heads into.

Bronson sighed and nodded. "What do I need to tell him?"

Of course, he knew it would do no good. Draco and Hermione had told him that they kept the mirror hidden since it would possibly cause an uproar if anyone found out they had it. It was only ever taken out during their scheduled visits. Damn this for happening the day after he had just spoken with them! If Draco was captured he did not know what he would do. A suicide mission immediately came to mind. For his handful of people, he would do anything. Even die.

XXX

Draco and Hermione sat outside, her in his lap while he smoked the one cigarette Padma allowed him after a careful evaluation. As much as Hermione hated it, she loved being close to him, so it was a bit of a tossup, depending on how stubborn she was feeling that day. Apparently, not very.

Padma was snuggling similarly into Ernie, but looking very displeased as he brought his own cigarette to his lips. "Disgusting," she said.

Ernie laughed and kissed her crinkled nose. "Love you too, Baby."

"Don't get your cigarette stank on me!" she said, pulling her head away from his.

Ernie kissed her again.

"Bleh!"

Hermione and Draco laughed as they watched them. It was late and they all should have been in bed hours ago, but being able to sit outside in the open air without having to worry about a curfew or someone watching them was a great relief, not to mention a privilege they now loved to take advantage of.

"So what's next on our agenda?" asked Ernie, turning towards them. "Breaking into the Hogwarts library?"

"We would like to," said Hermione, "but it's not exactly possible without our wands, especially with everyone wanting to come."

"But everyone *can't* come, Granger," said Draco, taking another drag. "The point is to be sneaky. How can we do that with ten plus people wandering through the halls?"

"We'd be under invisibility cloaks," explained Hermione. "With spells on our feet so we would not be heard and you in the lead to ward off Dementors."

"And how would we follow each other if we're all invisible?" he asked. "Depending on who's wandering around in there, he may have to divert our path several times. It will be impossible to keep track."

Hermione crinkled her forehead in thought. "I'll figure something out," she said. "The more people we have searching that library the better."

Just then, shouting could be heard from far away, possibly near the start of the barrier. All of their heads turned and listened.

"Kingsley, stop! We cannot be hasty! We need time to think, to come up with a -"

"There is *no* time, Minerva! We have until sunrise! Four hours! That's it! I will *not* have this girl's blood on my hands!"

"Yes, I know. But there has to be another -"

"There's no time!"

Kingsley stormed into view, his eyes immediately finding Draco. He froze. McGonagall followed his gaze, her mouth dropping open as she began to look sadly at the couple before her. Three people walked up behind them. The three Draco and Hermione had seen run into their office earlier. The only girl in the trio was whimpering while walking alongside a white sheet that seemed to be covering something. It did not take them long to realize it was a body.

"Who is that?" asked Ernie as he and Padma got to their feet.

"Anthony Goldstein," answered Kingsley, his eyes never leaving Draco. "He and Katie Bell were bombarded and captured while posing as you."

Draco gulped. "Oh?" His palms began to sweat as Hermione slowly climbed off of him. He stood even slower. "And what of this Katie?" he asked.

McGonagall could not even look in their direction. She shook her head as Kingsley continued to stare at Draco.

"They have agreed to a trade."

Hermione gasped. She grabbed Draco's hand. "No!" she shouted. "You can't do that!"

"Mr. Malfoy, I am afraid you and I have an agreement," said Kingsley, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a rolled piece of parchment.

"Draco, what is that?" asked Hermione, looking at him.

Draco gulped again, his eyes filling up with tears. "A contract," he answered. "I signed it so that I could stay here with you."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "No! You … you can't! We promised, Draco! We promised we would both survive this!"

"I made a deal."

"*Fuck* your deal! You are *not* sacrificing yourself, Draco! We'll find another way!"

"There is no time, Ms. Granger," said Kingsley, slipping the contract back into his pocket. "I was hoping I would never have to do this, especially this soon, but Ms. Bell is an important member of this team. We cannot leave her to die."

"And you cannot send Draco to his death!" she shouted, stepping protectively in front of him. "I won't allow it!"

"Granger … you know we can't let that girl -"

"Draco, no!" she cried, turning her neck to look at him. "You can't just hand yourself over to him! He'll hurt you, torture you, turn you inside out, rip you apart and then kill you! You can't let him do that! You can't let him win!"

"But if I'm Imperiused -"

"It doesn't matter! Even if he decides to let you live he will still hurt you, and then he will watch your every move, giving you even less freedom than before! He'll do everything he can to break you! I won't let him! I won't lose you! I -"

Draco grabbed Hermione's shoulders and turned her around. He pulled her into him and hugged her tightly. "Granger, please …"

Hermione sobbed into his chest. "I'll come with you! We'll go back and we'll die -"

"No!" he shouted, moving back so he could look into her eyes. "You are *not* going to die! You understand me? We're still both going to survive this! I *will* come back to you!"

Her head shook frantically. "No! No, you can't! I -"

Draco silenced her with a kiss. His lips moved slowly, wanting to remember every detail. Her taste, her scent, her fingers digging into his sides, the sweet feeling of her tongue against his, the way her bushy hair fell forward and tickled his cheek. He loved every piece of Hermione. Especially those amber eyes.

Draco reluctantly pulled away, opening his eyes just enough to see her wet and beautiful ones looking back at him. "I love you." He moved his mouth towards her ear and whispered. "*Stupefy.*"

Hermione went limp in his arms.

"You remember what I asked?" said Draco, looking at Kingsley.

"Of course," he said with a nod. "Mr. Crawford, Mr. Dalton, please take Ms. Granger to her room and make sure she does not leave it until I have returned."

"Yes, Sir."

Both wizards stepped forward. Draco picked Hermione up and carefully put her into one of their arms. He brushed the hair out of her eyes and kissed her one last time before quickly turning away.

"Ms. Patil, you will guide them to her room."

Padma, who had been watching everything in a trance-like state, slowly moved her sorrowful eyes towards Kingsley. "But …"

"Don't make me tell you again."

Padma's eyes filled with tears. She whimpered before quickly turning and running inside. The two wizards followed her and Draco watched as Hermione was taken away from him, possibly forever.

"Malfoy … you can't do this," Ernie said. He was still standing beside him.

"It's already done," said Draco, sucking back his tears. "Keep her safe for me, Mack."

"Ms. Perry, take Mr. Goldstein's body to the medical ward."

The witch sobbed again before nodding. She used her wand to guide the floating body inside, trying hard not to look at Draco as she passed him.

"Come along, Mr. Malfoy," said Kingsley, walking towards him. "We have much to

discuss and little time to do it in. Minerva, please get a platoon ready."

McGonagall nodded.

Kingsley headed inside with Draco dragging his feet behind him.

"Mr. Macmillan," McGonagall whispered to Ernie as soon as they were gone. "We are meeting just below the Eastern peak of the mountains and will take the Centaur Path through the forest to get there. Go and wake the others. This sort of thing will *not* happen on my watch."

Ernie let out a breath of relief. He nodded. "I understand. And Granger?"

"*Obviously* you will rescue her. Now off with you."

Ernie nodded again. He ran inside and immediately headed for Harry's room. Ginny would be with him now, and if anyone knew how to take charge of this, she would.

<center>XXX</center>

When Hermione woke up, she was lying on her bed with Crookshanks on her stomach.

"No."

She did not even care when her cat went flying as she leapt onto the floor. She went for the door and tried to pull it open, but it was locked. Hermione began pulling more aggressively, kicking and screaming while trying to muster up the magic she needed to get out of there. It did not take her long to get the door open, but the two wizards from earlier were standing on the other side. One of them waved their wand, and it slammed shut and locked again.

"Fucking bastards!" she screamed while banging on it hard.

She got it to open again. They closed it.

"Dammit!"

A third time. Closed.

"LET ME THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!"

Once more. Hermione was just about to try and hex them when she noticed both

wizards were already lying unconscious on the floor. She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows.

"Sorry, were you going to do that?" asked Ginny, stepping into view.

Hermione sighed in relief as she threw her arms around her friend. "What's happening? Where's Draco?"

"They just left," said Ron.

Hermione looked over to see him staring nervously down the corridor. Ernie and Padma were down near the corner, poking their heads around it to make sure no one was coming. Ernie turned back and gave the A-OK symbol. Down on the other end, Luna and Dean were doing the same thing. A few seconds later, Terry and Michael turned the corner.

"Did you get them?" asked Ginny as they approached her.

"Easy as pie," said Terry, holding two familiar wands towards Hermione. "Which one's yours?"

Hermione slowly lifted her hand and took both. She slipped Draco's into her pocket. "Why are you all doing this?" she asked.

"You and Malfoy are part of the resistance now," said Ginny, "and we take care of each other here."

Hermione smiled. She knew she said no more tears, but this was all a bit overwhelming.

"But don't think you're getting off that easy, Granger," said Michael. "We still need you to put that head of yours back together and come up with a plan to save Katie. Our mate, Anthony, had a bit of a thing for her, and we're not going to disappoint him in death."

"I'll think of something," said Hermione, running back into her room and grabbing her bag. If she had everything then there would be more options for a rescue. "Let's go."

They all gathered together and began running for the exit. Outside, Hermione was surprised to see Susan, Lavender, Justin and … "Seamus. You're out of the medical ward."

"Uh, yeah," said Seamus, blushing slightly. "I kinda just left."

"*Against* my advice," scolded Padma.

"I already told you I'm coming," he said. "Gotta make this even."

"McGonagall was right. They headed down the Centaur Path," said Susan. She looked around. "We can't *all* go, can we?"

More glances. "It does seem like a bit much," said Ginny, counting. Thirteen. "*And* we're an unlucky number. No go."

"That is just a silly superstition," said Luna.

Every last person looked at her and raised their eyebrows. That was definitely something they never thought they would hear coming out of her mouth.

"Let's make it more like six," said Ginny, getting them back to the task at hand. "Kingsley only brought two others and McGonagall is on our side. "So it's me, Hermy, Ron, Ernie -"

"If Ernie's on your list then I'm coming too," said Padma, raising her hand.

"But, Baby -"

"- Padma -" Ginny continued.

Padma smiled smugly at her boyfriend.

"- and one more."

Now Seamus raised his hand. "Did I not just say -?"

"Oh, fine," said Ginny. "It's decided."

"Well, this is a bummer," said Dean, crossing his arms. "I hope you realize you are leaving three members of your usual platoon behind."

Ginny smiled. "I do. Enjoy the rest because I've requested for us to get back in the action by next week."

"So which way is the Centaur Path?" asked Hermione, eager to get going. Every step Draco took away from her was a step too far.

"This way," said Ron, running off to the east.

"Thank you all," said Hermione, looking every last person over before running after

him.

Ginny, Ernie, Padma and Seamus were all close at her heels.

The others stood around, unsure of what they were supposed to do. Then something swooshed by them.

"Did you feel that?" asked Lavender, looking all around. "It felt like …"

"A broom," said Luna with a smile. "Looks like it will be seven. They say that's a lucky number, you know."

Lavender cocked her head. "Huh?"

Luna said nothing more, only hummed as she merrily skipped back inside.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Draco was having a hard time picking up his feet as he walked through the forest with two burly wizards on either side of him. He did not know either of them, seeing as they were at least a decade older than him, but they had an uncanny way of making him feel like a prisoner.

Every few steps, Draco would look back, his heart feeling heavy as he got further and further away from the girl he was leaving behind.

McGonagall watched him do this time and time again. She sighed and shook her head. It was possible she hated this just as much as he did.

"We will put the Imperius Curse on you when we reach the forest's edge," said Kingsley, turning his head halfway to glance at him.

Draco mumbled in response. He looked back again. Their goodbye had been so terrible, so heartbreaking, so … incomplete. Was his last kiss with her really going to be one she did not remember? His heart ached at the thought.

A large lump formed in the back of Draco's throat as he turned to face forward again. It took this long, but it had finally hit him. He might never see Hermione again. He had left her … in the cruelest way possible. And for what? A stupid contract he never should have signed in the first place. This was wrong. It was not supposed to end like this. After everything they had been through, he should not have just walked away. He should not have just -

"Stop right there."

Draco listened immediately, an instinctual effect that had developed over the course of several months of hearing that voice. The lump in his throat released as he looked to see Hermione standing in front of them, aiming her wand at Kingsley.

"Ms. Granger, I do not know where you got your wand but you will lower it immediately," said Kingsley as he raised his own. The two wizards on either side of Draco did the same.

"No, Kingsley, you will lower *your* wand immediately." Ginny stepped out of the trees to Kingsley's left. Her wand was already pointed right at him.

Kingsley went stiff. "Ms. Weasley, what are you -?"

Ron stepped out to his right, his wand also pointed. And then Ernie came out near the wizard on one side of Draco, and Padma came out on the other. A glance behind and Draco could see one more. That wizard he had saved, Seamus. Huh. And he had not even known he was out of the medical ward yet.

"Draco, get over here," Hermione ordered.

Draco looked back at her, their eyes locking. He could not hide his smile. "If you'll excuse me," he said to the wizard on his left. "My girl is summoning me." He turned to the one on the right. "She sure is cute when she's angry, isn't she?"

"Oh, you have not even begun to see my anger, Draco," she said through gritted teeth. "You stunned me and there *will* be consequences!"

"Hmm." Draco smirked as he silently hoped these consequences would be during a Hermione-dominant session in the bedroom, and involving a good thrashing. He always did like those. "While I do enjoy this hero act of yours, Love," said Draco, coming to her side, "there still is the small matter of the contract."

"That contract is bullshit!" spat Ron. "You've never made anyone else sign one of those!"

"The moment you told Malfoy he could stay, he should have been treated as an equal!" said Ginny.

"So you're saying we should leave Ms. Bell to die?" asked Kingsley.

Everyone retorted with their own versions of 'No'.

"But there are other ways!" said Hermione. "And if you can't accept that then Draco and I will leave! Right now! If we're not part of your base then that contract

is void!" She grabbed his hand and held on tight.

"I'm afraid it does not work like that, Ms. Granger," said Kingsley, still pointing his wand fervently. "If Mr. Malfoy does not follow through with the contract then the consequences will be dire."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "How could you?" she drawled, pulling Draco closer.

"Kingsley, if you go through with that contract then I will leave the base!" said Ginny. She looked across the small space at Ron and nodded.

"So will I," he said. "If you send Malfoy to his death then we will follow Hermy wherever she goes. Probably on a suicide mission to get him out."

"Yes, that is the plan," Hermione said honestly.

"Neither of you are going anywhere," said Kingsley. "Not with your family -"

"I have no family at the base," said another voice that had all of them looking around.

"Harry?" said Hermione, glancing at the spot beside her where she swore it had come from.

At that moment, Harry took off his invisibility cloak and appeared sitting on his broom. He looked sharply at Kingsley. "I spent almost five years waiting for my best friend to return. If she leaves then so do I. And if she chooses to go into the snake's pit then I will be by her side every step of the way."

Kingsley's wand lowered slightly. "You may not have any family, Mr. Potter, but your friends, your girlfriend -"

"Will all be there waiting when I get back," said Harry. He paused. "*If* I get back."

"Harry … you would really do that?" asked Hermione, gazing at her friend with an open mouth.

"Yes," said Harry without delay. "You came with me when I needed you without a second thought. I have always meant to return the favor."

Hermione's eyes became watery, but she worked hard to suck them back. This no crying thing sure was hard, especially with such great people in her life.

"So that's the deal, Kingsley," said Harry. "Destroy that contract or lose me and

Hermy. I know you are a firm believer in the prophecy. If I go as I am now then there is a great chance that it will not end in our favor. What will it be?"

Kingsley's wand lowered that last bit so it was resting by his side. He gazed at Harry for a long moment before moving his eyes to Draco and Hermione. She stepped in front of him.

"We are equals," said Harry. "All of us."

Kingsley sighed. He slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out the contract. After unrolling it, he gave the words on the parchment a good look. Then, without a word, he placed his wand at the top of it and dragged it down, successfully ripping the parchment in two. Kingsley dropped it to the ground and both ends burned until they were nothing but ash. Draco and Hermione let out breaths of relief.

"You'd better have a plan," said Kingsley, lifting his eyes and staring right at Hermione.

Hermione sucked in her lips and began glancing around nervously. Then her eyes fell upon the cloak in Harry's hands. Her head tilted as she stared at it with pursed eyebrows and an open mouth, her mind suddenly flooding with ideas. She moved the pieces around until it formed something brilliant, and then she smiled. "You know, I believe I do."

# Chapter 39: Madman

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Draco sat on a rock against the side of the peak. His wrists were bound, and Kingsley stood protectively in front of him. One of the burly wizards, who they had learned was named Donovan, was on one side of him while Ron was on the other.

It was not long before five figures were approaching them, mere silhouettes with the rising sun behind them. Two were in the lead, suggesting their superiority, and the other three were behind, the one in the center significantly shorter than the rest. Katie Bell. She was the only one not wearing a hood, with bound wrists and a beaten face. Her head was cast down but her eyes up, and they were aimed right at Draco, emitting a sense of pity she could not hide.

Once the five of them were closer, Draco squinted to get a better look. Stuart Parkinson was one of the ones in the lead, of course. There was no surprise there. And the other one was …

"Roddy! How long has it been, mate? How's your broth - Oh … right. Sore subject," said Draco, sucking in air through his teeth. "Well, at least we can say he went out with a bang! Literally."

Rodolphus glared at him, but Stuart had a hard time hiding his chuckle.

Kingsley nodded towards a cluster of trees to their right. A tingling sensation entered all of their bodies and Stuart held up a hand, signaling the two Death Eaters guarding Katie to stop.

"What's this?" he asked, looking all around as a very obvious shield suddenly surrounded the area.

"Just a little reassurance," said Kingsley, transfiguring a rock into a chair. "You might as well get comfortable. We're going to be here for an hour to make sure that really is Katie Bell you have behind you."

"Just ask her a bloody question," spat Stuart.

"Not good enough," said McGonagall, walking over from the trees with Ginny. "Ms. Bell only knows limited Occlumency. You could have learned her life story in the hours you've had her."

Stuart and Rodolphus grunted before Transfiguring chairs for themselves, but leaving the other three to stand.

"How do we even know this is Malfoy?" asked Rodolphus.

"Ask him a question," Ginny mocked as she went to stand by her brother.

Kingsley smiled. "I suppose you will find out in an hour."

"If you are Malfoy then why are you sitting there so freely?" asked Stuart. "The prick I know would never give himself up like this."

Draco shrugged. "The lady said I had to."

Stuart cocked an eyebrow. "Are you claiming you're Imperiused?"

Draco said nothing.

"Once he is in your possession, you are free to ask him what you please," said Kingsley. "Until then, silence really is preferred."

"Peterson, go and check the perimeter. Make the line visible," instructed Stuart, looking over his shoulder.

One of the guards standing next to Katie nodded and went walking along the edge of the shield. He pointed his wand and began drawing a glowing red line around it.

"Rodolphus, check the area for any invisible entities."

Rodolphus did not look pleased being ordered around, but he still stood up and did as he was told.

Stuart looked back at Kingsley and smiled. "Just to be sure no more of your people are hiding in this '*shield*'."

"I am afraid you will only be disappointed, Parkinson," said Kingsley. "All of our '*people*' are out in the forest making sure your '*people*' behave themselves."

"One can never be too careful," said Stuart with a smile.

When Rodolphus was finished, he looked over to notice Ron staring closely at the scar on his throat. He put his wand to it and spat out a rude, "*What*?"

Ron looked up into his eyes. "Oh, nothing. I just heard about that," he said, pointing at his own throat. "Quite unfortunate. That she didn't finish the job, that is."

Draco chuckled.

Rodolphus's face lit up with anger. He was just about to lunge at Ron when Stuart said, "Calm down, Rodolphus. He is just trying to get a rise out of you."

Peterson came back over and retook his stance as Katie's guard. Stuart looked around to see that the shield was not very large at all, and only went to the very start of the small cluster of trees where McGonagall had been hiding. No one noticed as she touched her wand the moment Peterson was finished, silently muttering to herself. Kingsley leaned his ear in to make it look as if she was whispering something to him.

Rodolphus was staring curiously at Draco, who looked rather bored as he tapped his foot and glanced around the area.

"What information did I give you in the Godric's Hollow cemetery after the resistance had fled?" he asked, obviously not trusting that the wizard sitting in front of him was, in fact, Draco Malfoy.

"You made sure I got the crests," said Draco, "then you told me Greyback wanted in so there was now one more for me to obtain."

"And what item did I take from you, then toss away?" asked Rodolphus, who was still not convinced.

Draco paused momentarily. "The ring," he answered. "With the amber stone. Same color as her eyes, wasn't it?" He winked.

On the outside of the shield, Dolohov and Macnair were ordering a group of Snatchers to surround the perimeter. There were enough trees, boulders and full on mountains around so they could move without being seen by the people in the inside.

Fenrir Greyback was also there, and he was going crazy running around the perimeter, sniffing like a dog and eyeing Ginny inside of it with a frightening hunger. It was only when he made his presence known that she was pulled into the shield by McGonagall at the last minute. Now she kept glancing sideways,

very aware as he ran around, trying to find the best spot to be in when the shields came down and she would finally be in his grasp.

"What has that bloody dog so riled up?" asked Dolohov as he worked on putting his own shield around the area. One that prevented anyone from using the Disillusionment Charm. Of course, they were completely aware of the resistance members hiding in the shadows but, at this point, everyone seemed to just be keeping out of each other's way. A fight would be inevitable in the end, considering neither side actually planned on giving anyone up that day. But, for now, they would prepare for what was soon to come, while keeping a close eye on their enemies in the process.

One of the Snatchers stopped at the edge of the trees, right near where McGonagall and Ginny had entered. He gazed through some branches and chuckled as the two groups stood there, awkwardly staring at each other. Occasionally, Draco would spit out some witty and potentially rude remark but, for the most part, they were silent.

The Snatcher heard a twig crack behind him. He spun quickly and aimed his wand. No one was there. Knowing the Disillusionment shield would already be up, he turned back around and watched them once more. A chill ran up his spine when a soft breeze tickled his side. It was as if someone was standing there. And then there was the faint whisper of one word. "*Imperio.*"

His eyes went blank as his muddled head felt at ease for what might have been the first time in his dark life.

"Didja get him?" a voice called from behind one of the trees.

"Yes," said the person beneath Harry's invisibility cloak. "He's under."

Seamus came out from his hiding place and walked towards them. He had on a normal invisibility cloak and was, therefore, visible. Ernie and Padma were just behind him, Hermione's bag tied around Padma's waist. She reached into it and pulled out a phial while Ernie stepped forward and yanked a hair out of the Imperiused Snatcher's head. He held his hand out to her.

Padma clutched the phial against her. "You don't have to do this, Ernie. Someone else could -"

"I already volunteered," he said, giving her a smile. "I'll be fine, baby. At least I'm not going into the bubble."

She gulped and nodded before reluctantly handing the phial over. Ernie dropped the hair into the liquid, held it up in salute, and said, "Cheers." He drank it down. Within moments, he had taken on the form of the fairly hideous Snatcher. He puckered his lips. "How 'bout a kiss, boo?"

Padma grimaced. "Never. I'm a taken witch." She seized his wrist and tied a red sash of hers around it so everyone on their side would know this was Ernie.

"Guess I'm off to patrol," he said. "I'll do my best to keep my comrades out of this area." He winked before running off.

"Finnegan, come here," ordered the voice underneath Harry's cloak.

Seamus followed it until he was right behind the red line of the barrier. Someone grabbed him and pulled him downwards.

"Stick your hand through the hole. Make sure the cloak works on the other side."

Seamus pulled his sleeve over his hand and inched it forward until it was through the barrier, vanishing before their very eyes. They all sighed in relief.

"I knew they'd be fucking idiots."

Seamus stood back up. Padma reached into the bag and pulled out another phial. She handed it to him and he took it nervously.

"You sure you're up for this?" asked the voice unsurely. It was supposed to be Ginny going in, but obviously *that* had not worked out as planned.

"Yeah, I'm sure," said Seamus with a nod. He shook the nerves out of him. "I've got this."

"All right then. Let's get on with it."

Seamus nodded again. He expanded his cloak so it was large enough to cover both him and the Imperiused Snatcher.

"Follow Finnegan and keep your mouth shut," said the voice to the Snatcher. "Listen to everything he tells you. He is just as much your master as I am."

The Snatcher was silent.

"Nod in compliance!"

He nodded.

With a nervous, deep breath, Seamus threw the cloak over the Snatchers head.

"Don't forget to put a Silencing Spell on both of your feet. But avoid stepping on anything you will crush if you can," said the voice. "I'll go first. See you on the other side."

The dirt beneath the red line of the barrier shifted as knees dragged across it. Seamus positioned the Snatcher behind him and took the lead, Padma making sure to keep the back-half of both of them covered as they crawled through.

Even with the spell on their feet, Seamus walked as quietly as possible towards Katie. She was a fair enough distance behind Parkinson and Lestrange that it should not be a problem to get to her without anyone noticing.

Seamus and the Snatcher stopped just beside her closest guard. If he had not been expecting it, he never would have heard the near silent, "*Imperio*," said to the wizard. "Act as if we are not even here and listen to everything the person sitting on the rock over there says."

Draco was the only one on a rock since the others had all purposely transfigured chairs.

Katie glanced sideways. She had definitely heard something but was unsure of what it was. A few moments passed before she heard the same something on her other side.

"Katie, it's Seamus," someone suddenly whispered into her ear.

She tried not to jump, but she was sure she at least jerked a little. Luckily, the two Death Eaters in charge had their backs to her.

"Hold still. I need to take one of your hairs."

There was a slight prick on the back of her head.

Underneath the cloak, Seamus slipped Katie's hair into the phial. "Drink this," he whispered, handing it to the Snatcher. He obeyed immediately and the cloak became much more comfortable once Seamus was sharing it with the pint-sized Katie Bell imitator. He moved the newly-formed Snatcher so he was in front of him, and positioned them just behind the real Katie, who could not help but glance down as a tingling sensation ran through her feet. A Silencing Charm.

"Make no noise and follow my lead," someone whispered into her. "Clench and unclench your fists twice so they know we're ready."

Katie did it obediently.

Rodolphus glanced over his shoulder, but when he saw everything was normal he turned back around and continued to stare daggers at Draco.

Draco smiled, his eyes glancing ever-so-slightly at Katie's hands. "So tell me something, Roddy. Why is it that the Dark Lord only asked for me in this trade when he had two perfectly good prisoners to bargain with? Does he not want Granger anymore?"

Rodolphus began breathing heavily.

"No," answered Stuart. "He has little interest in your precious Mudblood. But don't worry. He will take care of her when the time comes."

"Actually, I believe Roddy considers her to be *his* precious Mudblood." Draco chuckled. "Do you know what's funny, Roddy? That time you and Theo came to my flat, she was there. Sitting on my bloody balcony and clever enough to cast a Disillusionment Charm on the blanket she had brought out there with her. When you went outside, she was sitting less than a foot away from you and you had no fucking idea. The two of us had a good laugh about it after. She rather enjoyed a front row viewing of what she had done to your throat."

Rodolphus lunged forward but Stuart quickly pulled him back. "Hold yourself together, mate! You'll have your chance at the little prick later! Got it?"

Rodolphus nodded through heaving breaths and retook his seat.

During the scuffle, the person under Harry's cloak said, "Now," just loud enough so Seamus could hear.

There was a weird flash around Katie that had Macnair and Dolohov blinking their eyes. It was almost like the top of her head had vanished for a moment, but the rising sun was just behind her and the glint of it had them blinking again. Obviously just a trick of the light.

Someone Katie could not see took a firm hold of her arm and guided her towards the trees, she looked back to find that she was still standing there, looking as scared and obedient as ever.

Katie was led all the way to the red line, then pushed down and instructed to crawl

forward. She did and was surprised to find no boundary in her way. On the other side she was still invisible, but when Seamus crawled through, she could see him as clear as day. He pulled the cloak off of the top of his head and Padma ran forward.

Suddenly, Katie felt the security of the cloak remove itself from around her. She could not see it, but the tip of a wand touched her head and checked for the Imperius Curse.

"She's clean," said the same voice that had saved her. "Ask your question, Patil."

"Okay. Who were you dating up until six months ago?"

"*That's* your question?" mocked the voice.

Padma shrugged. "What's wrong with it? It's not information the Death Eaters would have been likely to extract from her mind. It's legit."

"It's stupid."

"It's -"

"Roger Davies," answered Katie. She looked back out of the branches and sighed. "I appreciate this rescue mission, but I can't let Malfoy sacrifice himself for me. I need to go back and -"

"Don't be a fucking idiot. I'm not sacrificing myself for anyone." The hood on Harry's cloak was suddenly pulled back to reveal the floating head of Draco Malfoy.

Katie gasped. "But … who's out there?" she asked, pointing at the fake Draco sitting on a rock.

"The only person who knows him well enough to deliver his snark properly," answered Padma with a snicker.

Draco looked back at the person disguised as him, his eyes filled with concern. He was the only one capable of performing the Imperius Curse so quietly, and successfully for that matter. That was the only reason he had agreed to let *her* do this.

"But …"

"Hold still," ordered Padma, lifting her wand to heal Katie's wounds. Then she

stopped, tilting her head as she stared at the other witch curiously. "That's funny. Your wounds appear to be -"

"Fake," finished Katie. "Yes, I had some help." She glanced over at Draco, but he did not meet her eyes since his were still heavily focused on the people inside of the barrier. Or person. At least Ron was out there. He would keep her safe.

"Draco, we need to go," said Padma, tugging on where she assumed his arm to be.

Draco pulled the cloak off and handed it to her.

Padma's eyes went wide. "But you're supposed to come with us."

"Obviously, you knew I was never going to do that," said Draco. "Not until I know my girl is safe."

"But -"

"You're wasting your time arguing," said Ernie in his Snatcher skin as he walked back into the area. "One of the other Snatcher's tried to head this way despite my insisting I had it covered. Dean used a successful Imperius on him, though. Thank, Merlin." He wiped his forehead dramatically. "But it could use a little fine-tuning."

"Yeah, bring him over," said Draco, beckoning with his fingers but still staring into the barrier.

Ernie disappeared.

When Harry had gone back to the base earlier - he was reluctant even though he knew it was for the best - he had made sure to send all of the people who had been left behind after them to help secure the area, plus a few additions. They had all taken different routes, so if anyone was watching it would not be so bloody obvious where they were coming from.

"Get her out of here, Patil," said Draco, finally tearing his eyes away to look at Padma. "I'll be fine."

Padma frowned. She reluctantly nodded before pulling Katie close. "Terry said they put up an anti-Apparition shield that stretches until the bottom of the mountain. Be ready to run."

"Got it," he said, flashing a smile.

"And be bloody careful!" She smiled back before throwing the cloak over hers and Katie's heads, and quickly guiding the other witch away.

Ernie appeared a few seconds later with the Imperiused Snatcher in tow. Draco lifted his wand and repaired the botched curse Dean had cast. They were lucky it had worked at all, but it was unclear whether this wizard's mind would be fried when it was removed.

The only reason Draco did not kill him now was because they did not want anyone unaccounted for before it was time. He glanced over at Seamus's wristwatch. Less than ten minutes until their hour was up. It was time to get ready for the chaos.

Ginny glanced down at her watch. It was almost time. She looked nervously at her friend in Draco's skin, but they just smiled confidently. "Countdown?"

"Tee minus one minute," said Ginny.

The fake Draco shrugged. Then he stood and took a good stretch.

"According to my watch, we still have five minutes until the hour is up," said Stuart.

"Yes, because you arrived about four minutes after I took the potion."

Stuart and Rodolphus looked taken aback. It was a few moments before they were hurrying to their feet, just in time to see Draco's features shift. His height was shorter while his hair was longer, browner and much more spirited. And then there was his eyes; bigger, wider and a beautiful shade of amber. And before they knew it, Hermione Granger was smiling at them.

"Hello, boys. It's been a long time."

Rodolphus took a moment to process what had happened. She was here. Right in front of him. And with a force more powerful than the one that had overcome him when he thought she was Draco, he lunged forward, his wand aimed and ready to take her as his. He cast a spell to summon her to him but, somehow, it bounced back and knocked him hard on his arse. He jumped up and charged again, this time hitting an invisible wall that shot him three feet up and five feet back.

Hermione chuckled. "Idiot. Did you really think we weren't anticipating this reaction?"

"Where's Draco?" asked Stuart, staring coldly at her.

"Not here," answered Hermione. "Just more proof that you're all idiots if you really

thought we'd give him up so easily."

Stuart went red in the face. He marched over to the fake Katie, who was still standing there obediently, and grabbed her by the throat. "Bring him." He dragged her forward. "Bring him now or this girl *dies*!"

Hermione smiled and shrugged. "Do it then. We already got what we came for."

Rodolphus raised his eyebrows. He looked at the girl Stuart held unsurely, but the other wizard did not seem to sense anything amiss.

"So tell me, Mudblood. What is it that has made you so cold? Perhaps it was one of those many sweaty nights we spent together in that tiny closet I kept you in. You remember, don't you, Mudblood? When I used to tie you so tight it left permanent marks in your skin."

Hermione had to stop herself from touching her scarred wrists. Ron was livid. He knew a curse would be impossible to cast right now with the wall, so he prepared himself to spit verbal curses at the man, but Hermione held out her hand to stop him. She slowly stepped forward until she was practically nose to nose with Stuart Parkinson and stared him straight in the eye.

"Don't think for even one second that you were ever important enough to have had any sort of effect on me. You were just another blank and nameless face in a part of my past I have already left behind." Her eyes moved to Rodolphus. "*Both* of you. You have not shaped me. You have barely left a mark."

She lifted her faintly scarred wrists and showed him. Padma and Ginny had been experimenting with different spells to get rid of them, and it seemed to be working.

"But I do still hope you're executed for your failures here today, Parkinson. But not you," she said to Rodolphus. "Frankly, I would like to finish the job myself, and I have always been great at following through with my commitments."

"Ms. Granger."

Hermione turned and looked at McGonagall.

"It's ready."

"Right," said Hermione. She turned back towards Stuart and Rodolphus. "Until next time then. You two back there!"

The two Death Eaters in the back stood up straight.

"Attack," she ordered. "Kill if you can. I suppose I can't be greedy if opportunity presents itself."

Rodolphus and Stuart both turned and dodged as their subordinates suddenly started shooting Killing Curses at them. Stuart dropped the fake Katie, who just sat there with wide, unblinking eyes.

"Let's go." Kingsley took Hermione's arm and cradled her against him, knowing very well that she would be one of the main targets on their way out. At least the two biggest threats were trapped in a bubble.

Ron held his sister's hand and kept her close as they walked. Last they checked, Greyback had been on the opposite side from where they were exiting, but everyone seemed to be running towards them now, not even caring that they were no longer hidden.

McGonagall had put a hole in the shield big enough for all of them to walk through, but not before sealing the smaller one that was located on the enemy's side. She kept an invisible wall up for a few hundred yards.

When they got to the trees, someone ran up beside the invisible wall.

Hermione gasped. "Draco, what the hell are you doing here? You were supposed to leave with Padma and Katie!"

"Fuck no! Not while you were locked in a bloody bubble with those pricks!" he shouted. "Besides, you wouldn't have left if it was me in there pretending to be you!"

"That is *completely* different!"

"*How*? How is it different?"

"That is beside the point! Now get the bloody hell out of -"

"The anti-Apparition shield extends all the way to the end of the mountain," interrupted Seamus as he appeared and ran along beside them. "Everyone has already agreed that we will split up and take out who we can. But our goal is not to start any battles, just to flee."

"Yes, and I expect you all to *actually* follow that order today," said Kingsley.

"By the way, love. You played me beautifully," said Draco, giving Hermione a wink.

The corners of her mouth twitched upwards. "Yes, well, I was thrown for a bit of a loop when Lestrange asked me what item he took from you and tossed away in Godric's Hollow. I had to venture a bit of a guess," she said while taking her ring out of her cloak.

"They're all coming!" shouted Hannah as she and Dean ran into view on Draco and Seamus's side of the invisible wall.

At that moment, Fenrir Greyback tore through the trees and lunged at Ginny. He was thrown back hard by the invisible wall.

They all exited the trees. Hannah grabbed Draco's hood and tossed it over his head. Not even a second later, Snatchers were coming at them in all directions. Michael, Terry and Luna were already shooting Killing Curses at them. There would be no stunning today. Only life or death.

Susan, the other burly wizard and Dalton ran from the north, while Justin, Lavender and Crawford came from the east.

The girl, Perry, pretty much appeared out of nowhere and immediately took out a Snatcher. Their whole platoon was out for revenge for Anthony, and they wanted blood. Ernie ran up with the other Snatchers in his fake skin. He danced around curses and did his best to take people down without anyone noticing. It would be another good five minutes before he changed back.

Suddenly, a large blast shot against the invisible wall, bouncing back and sending Draco, Hannah and Dean flying. Draco quickly got up and scurried back towards the wall.

"Draco, go!" ordered Hermione, pulling away from Kingsley and staring into his eyes. "You can't follow me to the end of this! It's too dangerous! You need to take the exit to the west. Understand?"

"But -"

"You are *delaying* me, Draco!" she snapped as Kingsley grabbed her arm again and yanked. "I will see you at the base!"

Draco grunted as she ran further and further away from him. He knew she was right. Too many Snatchers were already to the north where she was headed and it would be suicide to run through them all.

He felt a tug on his arm and turned to see Hannah pulling him. Dean took the lead as they were chased by a group of Snatchers, Ernie included. Draco kept his head

down so no one could see him through his cloak.

Hermione kept glancing over her shoulder, but she did not go far before Draco was no longer in her line of sight. They kept running faster but the Snatchers were keeping up with them. There had to be at least a dozen on them alone. Luna, Terry, Lavender, Justin and Susan had led some of them off in various directions, but the others were all still occupied with their own nuisances.

"The barrier is just about over!" called McGonagall. She took the lead, and the second they were out of the wall, she held up her wand and used her signature spell to freeze all of the Snatchers in their radius.

None of them noticed Greyback sprinting from the direction they had had just fled. He pounced right into Ginny, knocking Ron over before rolling with her on the ground. Hermione tried to freeze him since a Killing Curse was too risky when he had Ginny so close, but he blocked it before jumping to his feet with her.

"Let go of my fucking sister!" shouted Ron, turning red in the face as he hurried to his feet.

"Look out!" Perry called from the distance.

Hermione had been so focused on Ginny, that she barely had time to dodge Dolohov's Killing Curse that was headed straight for her.

"Ms. Granger, let's go!" ordered Kingsley, grabbing her arm.

Hermione pushed him off and ran to help Ginny. She did not just find her way back to her friends to lose one now.

"You would not want your sister if you knew of the beast that lives inside of her!" shouted Greyback as he took a few steps back with his wand steadily aimed at Ron.

"I already know!" shouted Ron. "And it changes nothing!"

Ginny's eyes became teary as she looked at her brother. She stomped hard onto Greyback's foot and bit even harder onto the arm that was holding her. He grimaced enough to give them a window. Ron shot a Stunning Spell at him. Greyback blocked it, but since he had been so focused on Ron, he missed Hermione's Stunning Spell and fell back. Ron grabbed Ginny's hand and the three of them took off running.

Kingsley, McGonagall and Donovan were already far in the distance, battling with

Dolohov. Hermione, Ron and Ginny headed in the other direction, avoiding a few more Snatchers before reaching the bottom of the mountain and Apparating the hell out of there.

On the other end of the mountain, Dean, Hannah, Seamus and Draco had just escaped Macnair when they heard someone shout, "He's one of them! Kill him! Kill him now!"

Draco turned to see several Snatchers cornering a recently reformed Ernie. He grunted. "Keep going!" he shouted at Dean, Hannah and Seamus, not even looking to see if they listened before running back.

With a crescent-shaped wave of his wand, he sent out a blast powerful enough to take out three of the Snatchers. Ernie ran forward. "You can't bloody save me now! We just got even!"

"Looks like you owe me one more," said Draco, running off in the direction Hannah and Dean had just gone. Ernie was close behind him.

They could hear the patter of several sets of footsteps running after them, but they did not dare look back. Then they heard a scream.

Draco and Ernie began looking around, only to find that Dean, Hannah and Seamus had veered. They were now to their right with Macnair and three Snatchers surrounding them.

Draco grunted again before changing directions and running towards them. It seemed Hermione and friends, and their bloody hero complexes, were finally rubbing off on him. He hated that.

Draco got one of the Snatchers and Ernie got another. Macnair whipped around and began dueling with them. They distracted him enough for Dean, Hannah and Seamus to get away from the other Snatcher, and start running again. Draco and Ernie ran after them.

The bottom of the mountain was finally in view. They were only a few yards away when Hannah tripped and fell hard onto her stomach. Dean, Ernie and Seamus did not notice, since she had been in the rear, but Draco heard her cry and turned back for her. When he crouched down and grabbed her hand, a blast sent him flying back. His hood fell off as he shot back up, giving Macnair a clear view of his face.

"You bloody little prick," he said with a faint chuckle. "You were here the whole

fucking time?"

"Looks like it," said Draco, pulling Hannah up and taking off running again.

"Oh no you don't, Malfoy! You will *not* evade the Dark Lord's wrath again! *Stupefy*!"

Hannah pushed Draco out of the way, letting herself get hit with the spell.

"Bloody hell!"

Draco scooped her up and tossed her unconscious body over his shoulder.

"STOP HIM!" Macnair shouted behind him.

Suddenly, Snatchers were coming at him in all directions. How many of them fucking were there? Far more than they had estimated earlier. And then Rodolphus was there, his eyes wide and angry as he chased after him, the only one actually trying to hit him with a Killing Curse.

Draco dodged left to avoid it. Only a little bit further.

"DRACO!" someone screamed. He was fairly certain it was Stuart, but turning to see if he was correct hardly seemed important right now.

A Cruciatus Curse was shot at him. Instead of dodging, Draco pushed his foot forward and used it to slide those last few steps towards the end of the shield on his side. It hurt like hell, but he got where he needed to be, getting one last look at the many faces running towards him before Apparating him and Hannah out of there.

When Draco arrived in the Forbidden Forest, in the same spot he had Apparated with Ginny, he suddenly realized that his ankle hurt like hell. He must have twisted it while doing a bloody slide with a girl tossed over his shoulder.

Ignoring the pain, Draco propped Hannah against a tree before removing the Stunning Spell. She popped back awake, her eyes darting around before they finally settled on Draco.

"I'm alive?"

He nodded.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Just before the shield around the base," he answered, motioning in the direction they wanted to go with his head.

"Then let's get the hell out of here!"

Hannah jumped up, grabbing his arm to bring him with her, but Draco grimaced in pain.

"Oh, shoot! You're hurt!" she said, crouching back down and searching his body for the wound.

"My right ankle," he said.

"Do you think you could crawl inside the shield, and then I'll take a look at it?"

Draco nodded. She helped him maneuver through those few feet. Then Draco pressed his back against a tree and rolled up his trouser leg.

Hannah sat down and took a good look at it. "What did you do? You must have carried me. Did you trip while running or something?"

"Or something," he said. "Don't worry about it. Just go and get Patil. Bring her back here for me."

"No, I can do it," said Hannah. "I've done a little Mediwitch training with Padma and Ginny, so I can at least get you well enough to walk back slowly."

"I'd really rather you just -"

"Would you just let me bloody help you?" she snapped. Draco was taken aback. It was the first time he had ever heard her use such language. "I don't know why you dislike me so much that you won't even let me heal your ankle on my -"

"I killed your grandmother."

Hannah froze, her eyes unblinking as she slowly turned ashen. "W-what?"

Draco was fully aware that this might have been the worst possible time for this confession, but it just slipped out. "You heard me," he said in a dry, cracking voice. "Mack said you wanted to know if I killed anyone in your family, so there it is. I did."

Tears slowly began to fill Hannah's eyes. "Which grandmother?" she asked.

"Paternal," he answered.

She cast her head downwards and let the tears fall. "When?"

"October."

Her shoulders bobbed. "That recently?"

Draco gulped. "Yes," he said weakly. "I … I'm sor -"

Hannah's head shot back up. He was so distracted by her eyes boring into his that he did not even notice her lift her wand and shout, "*Legilimens*!"

Hannah entered his mind, skillfully flipping through his memories to reach October, searching until she found the familiar face of the old woman she loved very dearly, but would never see again. She focused on Anna and viewed every memory that had to do with her. Her death, Draco's breakdown in the washroom, Hermione telling him what she had seen in Theo's mind, Theo's attack on Fiona … She saw it all.

And then Hannah was back out, her tears gone but her cheeks still wet.

"How did you bloody do that?" asked Draco. He had been practicing Legilimency for years and still could not maneuver through someone's mind like that.

"I'm a natural," she said casually before looking back down at his swollen ankle. "She's the one who helped Hermy escape."

Draco gulped. "Yes."

"And that girl, your friend's sister, she turned her in."

"She did."

Hannah sighed. She was silent as she began waving her wand over his injury.

"Abbott, I … I'm sor -"

"Don't," she said, holding up her hand to stop him. "You had no choice, Malfoy, and you made it easier for her. That's all I could ask for."

Draco blinked. "Really?"

Hannah nodded. "I know my grandmother. She really wasn't afraid, and she was ready to die. I could see it in her eyes."

"You're not angry?"

"I'm not McLaggen!" she snapped. "Unlike him, I understand that not everyone can be saved. She made her choice, and she chose Hermy."

A green light flowed out of her wand and wound around his ankle. The relief Draco felt was instantaneous. Hannah inspected it while tapping her wand against her knee.

"I really wish you would stop punishing yourself for things that were out of your control," said Hannah. "I heard you tell Ginny that you're good at reading people. Well, I'm good at reading them too and I *know* you're not a bad person. I even knew it back in school, despite your many attempts to prove otherwise." Her mouth twitched into a soft smile.

Draco smiled back.

"Come on, Malfoy," said Hannah, taking his hand and pulling them both to their feet. "It's time to get you back to your lady love."

Draco chuckled as she positioned his arm around her shoulders. "She's probably going to be bloody pissed when she sees I'm injured."

"It wouldn't be right if she wasn't." Hannah was silent for a moment as they began to waddle back towards the base. She glanced sideways at him. "Theo seems to have spent a lot of time with her. Do you think he would let me see his memories when this is all said and done with?"

"Yeah, he probably would," said Draco. "He liked your grandmother a lot. His own family is so fucking crappy that I think he was happy to find something so normal feeling in her."

Hannah nodded. "She was a great woman."

No more words were shared between them. Draco knew Hannah still needed time to grieve, but he hoped she was being honest when she said no apologies were necessary. It definitely would not hurt to have somebody that good at Legilimency on his side.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Voldemort sat at the head of his table, his folded hands propped up on elbows and resting in front of his mouth. All of his Death Eaters sat around in silence, waiting for the others to return with Draco Malfoy in their possession.

Pansy sat there nervously, trying hard to keep herself composed while Theo

stroked her knee underneath the table. He was much better at this comforting thing than he used to be.

The air in the room was off, and she somehow just knew that something had gone horribly wrong. The only problem was she was not sure which side it had gone wrong for.

A door banged in the distance. Yelling commenced, coming closer and closer until Stuart, Rodolphus, Macnair and Dolohov barged into the room. One look at their master and they all became silent.

"Where is Draco?" inquired Voldemort without so much as a glance in their direction.

"It was not him, my Lord," said Stuart. "It was Harry Potter's Mudblood. She disguised herself as him and -"

"But he was there!" shouted Macnair. "I saw him and so did you, you *fucking* failure!"

"It could not have been him!" Stuart retorted. "It had to be the Mudblood disguising herself as him again! There is no way he would have been stupid enough to -"

"It was not her," said Dolohov. "I saw her Disapparate while that bloody Kingsley and the old woman were attacking me."

"She could have gone back!"

"Why?" shouted Macnair. "Why would she have gone back? Obviously, she's not an idiot! She got that fucking girl out of there right under your bloody noses!"

Voldemort finally turned his head. "Stuart, do not tell me Katie is no longer in our possession."

Stuart gulped. "She is not, my Lord. We thought we had her, but it turned out to be one of our Snatchers under the Imperius Curse. We are unsure when or how they made the switch."

The Dark Lord was frighteningly silent as he gazed at his servants. "How many casualties were there on their side?"

Stuart's whole body began to shake. "None, my Lord."

"None," repeated Voldemort, his forehead rising. "And how many on ours?"

He went white. "Seven, my Lord."

"And over a dozen injuries," added Macnair.

"Were we outnumbered?"

Pansy could literally see the fear growing in her father's eyes. "No, my Lord. We outnumbered them. Four to one."

Voldemort's head slowly turned away from them again. He gazed forward for a moment before his eyes drifted over to Pansy. She tried her best to mask her fear. Theo grabbed one of her hands underneath the table and held on tight.

"Pansy, dear, won't you tell me your feelings on this matter. Should or should not your father be punished for his *considerable* failure today?"

Pansy looked over her shoulder at her father. For a brief moment, she felt pity. Then his face fell into a cruel grimace as he threatened her to defy him.

It was this face that caused her to be hit with a million memories at once. Him hitting her mother in front of her when she was a child. Always telling her she was not good enough in school, even when she got perfect marks, or pretty enough, claiming no one would ever want her. Just a hideous, fat cow. That is what he called her. She remembered sitting on the sofa in the drawing room with her mother, trying to comfort her as he loudly raped Granger in the other room, making her cry, and scream, and beg for mercy. At the time, she had only felt for her mother. It was not until a year later when it finally hit her that a girl she knew was being forced against her will to shag her father. That was when she first truly felt disgusted with herself.

Pansy saw his face when she became a Death Eater, laughing at her as she trembled in fear when the Dark Lord put his mark on her, and how he did not care at all when she came home to find that her mother had taken her own life, or so everyone believed. Pansy did not. Her mother was depressed but she was not suicidal. But he … he was a maniac.

"He should, my Lord," answered Pansy, giving her father a faint smile. She turned back towards Voldemort. "He was more than happy to see Draco receive his punishment on New Year's, and I believe his error today is far greater than that."

Voldemort smiled, sending chills down her spine. "I believe you are right." Without so much as a movement, a flinch, a blink of his eye, the Dark Lord said the word, "*Crucio*," and Stuart fell to his knees, screaming out in agony.

"Just one curse and you are already down, Father," said Pansy, watching him with a wicked grin. "I would appreciate it if you did not disgrace the Parkinson name with your lack of discipline."

Stuart scowled at her as he got back to his feet. When he looked back at the Dark Lord, he now had his wand out and aimed. "*Crucio*!"

Stuart began to collapse, but fought hard to stay on his feet.

"*Crucio*!"

His knees began to buckle.

"*Crucio*!"

They were nearly at the floor before he straightened himself up.

"Care to give it a try, Pansy dear?"

Pansy nodded at the Dark Lord before standing and aiming her wand. Her and her father locked eyes one final time before she shouted, "*Crucio*!"

Stuart finally collapsed. Before her curse even finished washing through him, Voldemort cast it again. He looked at Pansy and expected her to do the same, the two of them alternating time and time again.

Before long, Pansy had completely lost count of how many times her father had been punished, but when Voldemort finally held his hand up, telling her to stop, Stuart was just lying there, his eyes blank but he was still fully conscious.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Macnair, coming over and giving him a kick. Stuart grabbed his foot and knocked him on his back. He grabbed the other wizard's cloak, pulled him close and screamed wildly into his face.

Bellatrix chuckled from her seat. "My dear husband and I have seen this before," she said, looking at Rodolphus almost affectionately for the first time since Pansy had known them.

Rodolphus smiled. "Yes, the Longbottoms. That was a fun day."

"Macnair, Dolohov, put him in the dungeons until further notice," ordered Voldemort. "Then I expect you to get back here promptly for your *own* punishments."

"Yes, my Lord," they both said, looking at each other nervously before leading a hysterical Stuart from the room.

Pansy gazed after him, unblinking. It was a moment before she realized Voldemort had come up beside her. "I did not realize insanity could come so quickly," she said.

"It can in excess," he answered. "Were you hoping for death?"

"Not by *my* hand, my Lord," she answered honestly.

"I will keep that in mind when I finally dispose of him."

Voldemort turned and exited. Death Eaters vacated their chairs and quickly began to file out of the room, but Pansy could not move, still frozen as Theo and Goyle walked up on either side of her.

"You all right?" asked Theo, putting an arm around her shoulders.

Pansy gulped and nodded. It was a funny feeling, being one of the two hands to condemn her own father to a fate far worse than death. Even though she had hated him like no other.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Hermione paced outside of the base, her mind overflowing with horrible thoughts on where Draco could be right now. He and Hannah were the only ones not back yet. Seamus, Dean and Ernie had all lost track of them along the way. They swore that they were right behind them, but it had been a good ten minutes and they still were not back yet.

"Hermy, could you please just sit down," said Ron as he watched her from a chair. Ginny was glancing around nervously beside him and Harry was already searching the perimeter of the shield on his broom.

"Still not here?" asked Kingsley as he walked back outside.

Hermione turned towards him and frantically shook her head. "No. How's Katie?" she asked in an attempt to get her mind off of Draco.

"Perfectly fine, actually," said Kingsley. "Someone conjured some rather believable bruises on her, but she won't say who it was."

Hermione nodded. She looked back out into the forest, waiting for Draco to

emerge. "I'm a little curious to hear what your plan was if I had not intervened," said Hermione. "There were only five of you including Draco. With all of those Snatchers, there is no way you could have gotten out of there unless they followed through with their deal, even with yours and Professor McGonagall's skills."

Kingsley smiled. "Then let us just be glad that you intervened."

"Hermy, look over there!" Ginny shouted, pointing as she hopped to her feet.

Hermione followed her finger to see Harry flying slowly beside Draco, supporting one of his arms around his shoulders while Hannah supported the other. Hermione ran forward, not even caring that Draco cried out in pain when she threw her arms around him.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" she said, letting out a breath of relief. She pulled away and looked down at his ankle. "What happened?"

"I had to make a dramatic exit," he said. "I'm pretty sure my whole right side is scraped up."

Hermione ripped the bottom of his trousers a bit to take a look. She grimaced. "Merlin, Draco. Did you do a baseball slide or something?"

"What's *bass*-ball?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Never mind. Padma's in the medical ward with Katie. Harry, could you take him there on the back of your -?"

"Hell no!"

"I already offered," said Harry.

"Draco, this is no time to be proud," said Hermione. "Now, get on."

"You can't make -"

"Get on!" she snapped, pointing fervently at the broom.

"So bloody demanding," Draco muttered as Hannah helped him onto Harry's broom.

Hermione smiled.

"This is fucking humiliating."

She took his hand and walked along beside them. Ginny, Ron, Hannah and Kingsley all followed after.

When they got to the medical ward, Harry tilted his broom just right so Draco fell off the side and onto a bed. Hermione tore her way up the rest of his trousers. Everyone made a face when they saw the horrible, bloody scrapes running up his leg.

"Malfoy, what did you do?" asked Padma as she hurried over.

"You try sliding to safety with a hundred pound girl over your shoulder."

"I'm more than that," said Hannah with a smile.

"Where the bloody hell did you two go?" demanded Ernie as he walked over to them. Padma was already hard at work healing his wounds.

"I tripped," said Hannah. "Malfoy came back for me."

Ernie looked horrified. "You tripped? Well, aren't I just a bloody rotten friend!"

"Why were you carrying her?" asked Hermione as she pulled up a chair beside the bed and retook his hand.

"Abbott took a Stunning Spell for me," answered Draco. "My hood fell back when I helped her and they suddenly cared a lot less about killing us."

Hermione's eyes widened. She took several deep breaths while squeezing the life out of his hand. "You weren't supposed to stay."

Draco smirked. "Don't pretend you didn't already know I would."

Hermione's mouth twitched upward. "Arse."

An hour later, the medical ward had pretty much cleared out. Draco had been given a Sleeping Draught - they pretty much had to force it down his throat - and was now resting while Hermione sat faithfully by his side. She looked into the back of the room, where Katie was sitting similarly beside Anthony's cold body. Rigor Mortis had already kicked it, but that did not stop her from trying to hold his hand.

Hermione stood up and slowly walked over to her. There were already several empty chairs around her where the rest of her platoon had been sitting until a short while ago. Hermione took the one closest to her.

"Someone must have closed his eyes," said Katie in a quiet voice. "They were wide open when it happened."

Hermione looked at Anthony and frowned.

Without so much as a glance upward, Katie said, "I'm really glad you're safe."

Hermione nodded. "I'm glad you're safe too. But … forgive me if this is not the time, but I'm just a little curious about what happened to you. Someone protected you?"

Katie nodded. "I didn't tell the others, but I suppose there's no harm in telling you. You probably already know he's all right."

"Who?" asked Hermione.

"Lucius Malfoy," answered Katie.

Hermione went white. "Lu …" She gulped, took a deep breath and started again. "Lucius Malfoy helped you?"

"Yes. When You-Know-Who offered me to his Death Eaters, Lucius jumped up and demanded I be his, saying something about liking my fire. He carried me away and I …" Katie's eyes filled with tears. She wiped at them. "I was so sure he was going to rape me, but he didn't. All he did was toss me onto his bed and give me a book. And then Pansy Parkinson came in, and gave me food and water. She even French-braided my hair trying to keep me at ease." She chuckled softly. "Of course, we had to take it out and make me look a little worse for wear, but I just … I couldn't believe I was saved by Death Eaters. I still can't believe it."

Hermione could not believe it either. Lucius Malfoy a hero? It seemed completely unfathomable. Especially since he had been anything but one to her. But now … she honestly did not know what to think.

Hermione stole a glance back at Draco.

"He gave me something for him," said Katie, reaching into her pocket. She pulled out a small, silver locket without a chain and handed it to her.

Hermione stared closely at it. Narcissa's locket. She had felt horrible when she realized she had left it behind and, now, here it was. Back in Draco's possession.

Hermione popped it open. On one side was a photo of Narcissa and Lucius on their wedding day, and on the other was Narcissa and Draco as a young boy of maybe five. These were the two people Narcissa loved most in the world. But

Hermione … she could not look at Lucius without her mind instantly going back to that day … the most horrible day of her life. He had taken so much from her, but she suddenly found herself wondering what it must have been like for him. Only hours after losing the love of his life, and forced to take the innocence of a girl to save the only person he had left. His son who hated him now. Theo had said this war was filled with shades of gray but, when it came to Lucius, Hermione was struggling to find her way out of the black.

# Chapter 40: It Won't Be Long

**A/N: Sorry for the delay, but it has been one HELL of a week. Thank Merlin (HP reference, ah! 8-D) it's Friday! Time to get some much needed rest. Wake me with reviews! ;o)**

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"WE'RE HERE!" Ernie shouted as he yanked off his and Padma's invisibility cloak and held his arms up in victory.

"Baby, keep it down!" she snapped in a hushed tone. "We may have made it to our destination, but we're still in Hogwarts."

"Oh, come on. No one's allowed to study this late," said Ernie. "And with the Dementors on guard duty, I doubt anyone actually *wants* to sneak out anymore."

"You'd be surprised," said Draco, pulling off his and Hermione's cloak.

A few seconds later, Ron and Ginny came out of Harry's cloak, and Luna and Terry came out of the last. Draco was just happy they were unable to obtain anymore invisibility cloaks because, for some reason, *everyone* wanted to come. Bloody adventure seekers.

To get them all here safely, and without losing anyone, Hermione had used a Disillusionment Charm on a rope and they had all tied it around their waists. They made sure to stick close to walls in case anyone passed them. Luckily, they only saw a few house-elves and Draco took care of the Dementors. It was late so all of the students and professors were in bed. Hopefully.

One of the secret passageways led right from the center of the Forbidden Forest. It was not exactly close to their destination, but the one in Hogsmeade was not an option since they were unable to use their cloaks in town. And the one in the Shrieking Shack only led to the Whomping Willow, and they needed to be inside.

"All right," said Hermione, bundling up the rope as everyone untied it and storing it in her small bag. "Ginny, Ron, Padma, Ernie, you three search the Healing Magic section while the rest of us search the Forbidden section. If you can think of anywhere else you would like to search let us know before you go wandering off on your own. Do you all still have the bracelets I gave you?"

Everyone nodded and held up their wrists. Victoire and Luna had made them several nights previously, and Hermione had put a Protean Charm on all of them. Only, each one worked as a master bracelet so anyone could relay messages to the others. It took her a bit of time to get it right, but Hermione was more than

satisfied with the result.

"Good. Remember to use them if you are cornered, or sense anyone approaching. Person, Dementor, house-elf, or … well, other, I suppose. It doesn't matter," said Hermione, scrunching up her face in thought as she considered what else might be roaming the corridors of Hogwarts. But that was not what was important right now. "Stick together and, when you have books, we'll all meet at the tables in the very back. Understood?"

Everyone nodded again and went scurrying off. They all gathered books quickly and met at the tables in the back. No one wanted to be away from Draco and his mark for very long, which was an ironic twist of fate for resistance members.

"I really can't believe we snuck back into school to study," said Ernie as he scanned the index of the book he was currently investigating. "I mean, out of all the things this place has to offer. A Quidditch pitch. Large beds. Potions galore. Bathtubs built for two …"

Padma smirked beside him and gave his arm a little shove. "You've never complained about the baths at the base before."

"We make it work," he said with a grin.

"You know, Granger and I haven't tried that yet, but we are fans of bath time fun. So would you say it's manageable?"

"Oh, yeah! Definitely!"

Hermione kept her eyes firmly on the book in front of her, but she used her peripherals to watch Ron's eyes darken slightly as he glanced at Draco. Even though he was trying hard to be supportive of her and Draco, she knew it took more than just a snap of the fingers to vanish all traces of the feelings you have for someone. With a light sigh, he closed the book he was looking at and headed back to the Healing Magic section.

As soon as he was gone, Padma reached across the table and grabbed his book. She flipped through a few pages before carefully putting it into a satchel she had made Hermione put an Undetectable Extension Charm on for her.

"Are you *stealing* books, Padma?" asked Hermione with a fallen jaw and pursed eyebrows.

"It's not *stealing*, Hermy, It's *borrowing*. We're in a library," said Padma. "I'll give

them back when the war is over. I'd read them now but we're here for Harry."

Hermione grunted and nodded. She did not like it, but Padma did need these books to improve her Healing Magic.

Shutting the book she was looking at, Hermione pushed it over to Padma before standing up and heading back towards the Forbidden section. She had barely started browsing when she felt a set of warm arms wrap around her waist.

"You mad at me, love?" asked Draco while nibbling on her ear.

"No," she said, twitching her head away to get him to stop, but this just made Draco move to her neck instead.

"Really? Because you seem mad."

"I just don't understand why you need to do that." Doing her best to ignore his lips, tongue and teeth, Hermione grabbed a book off of the shelf and began leafing through it. "Ron is trying really hard to be supportive of us, and you talking about our '*bath time fun*' isn't exactly being considerate, now, is it?"

"Sorry," said Draco, moving one of his hands up to fondle her breasts. "I honestly forgot he was there." He began grazing his teeth where her neck met her collarbone while his other hand slipped into her cloak. It slowly began to undo her trousers.

Hermione slammed the book shut. "Draco, what are you doing?"

"Well, we *are* in the Forbidden section," he said, slipping his hand into her open trousers. "I thought it would be fun to do something forbidden."

"Like shag in a library?" she asked as she put the book back in its place.

"The thought did cross my mind."

"While *any* of the people we came here with could just walk on by and catch us?"

"I told them to stay away for a bit," he said. "Saying we needed to talk privately."

"Draco Malfoy, you're horrible!"

Draco smirked against her skin. "I don't hear you saying no."

He fisted her hair and turned her head so her lips met his. They kissed hard,

Hermione moaning into his mouth as his fingers slipped into her knickers and began stroking her clit. They traveled downwards and Draco was very happy to find a wet cavern waiting for him.

"I should have known shagging in a library would be at the top of your list of sexual fantasies." He began undoing his own trousers.

"Draco, we …" Hermione gulped, her eyes closing. "We really shouldn't. What if a Dementor comes -?"

"We won't take our clothes off," he said, slipping one warm hand underneath her jumper. "Come on, love." He kissed her neck again. "Be spontaneous with me."

Hermione bit her lip. She was just about to nod in compliance when her eyes opened and fell upon the books in front of her. She froze, her body slackening and no longer responding to Draco's touch. His hands stopped moving.

"Something wrong?"

Hermione shook her head. She reached out and grabbed a book off of the shelf. Draco looked over her shoulder at the title. *How to Remove Broken Curses and Other Challenging Magic*.

"Didn't you say that Harry's paralysis might have been caused by a piece of You-Know-Who's Killing Curse clinging to his spine?"

"I did say that."

Draco frowned as Hermione instinctually removed his hand from her trousers and buttoned them up again. She began flipping through the book, stopping on the page with the chapter titles and reading each one carefully, biting down on her lip in a far less sexual manner as ideas flooded through that bushy head of hers. Her eyes lit up and her mouth fell into a large 'O' shape.

"Draco, look at this!" she shouted while pointing at one of the chapters. "*The Effects of Broken Curses and How to Remove Them*! My god, this is brilliant!"

Hermione pushed the hand on the inside of her jumper away and quickly wandered off with her nose still buried deep in the book.

"Are you coming?" she called.

"Not unless you get back here," Draco muttered to himself.

Hermione stopped and turned. "What?"

"In a minute!" he said, pointing down at his tented cloak.

"Oh!" Hermione blushed. She had completely forgotten about that. "Later," she whispered before hurrying off.

Draco grunted as he reached into his cloak and redid his trousers. He let out a loud, frustrated sigh as he leaned back against the bookshelf with his eyes closed. And his plans of seduction had been going so well.

He stayed there for a moment, trying to think of whatever he could to bring his arousal down. Goblins, the old librarian Madam Pince, Weasel and that bitch Lucy going at it. They were all repulsive.

Right when Draco finally began to cool off, another chill entered the air. The lights in the library flickered, which was soon followed by his burning wrist. He lifted it and watched as words began to scrawl across the silver charm. *Dementors. Healing Magic section. Row 12.*

Draco straightened himself up and hurried to the row in question. The lights went out completely and Draco readied his wand. "*Lumos*!"

When he got to row twelve, Ron was standing there and staring through one of the shelves to the other side. He turned, looked at Draco, and then pointed. "They're heading that way."

Draco followed the direction of his finger with Ron at his heels. Even in this pitch black room, the Dementors were hard to miss. Large and ghostly, with flowing cloaks slightly denser than the air around them. Draco touched his wand to his mark. It lit up and shot at what appeared to be half a dozen Dementors, sending them flying off in the opposite direction and, eventually, out of the library.

"That's a bloody neat trick," said Ron as soon as the lights came back on. He stared curiously at Draco's arm. "How does it work?"

"I have no fucking idea," Draco said honestly. "Bellatrix was the only one who even knew it existed until recently."

The two of them headed back to where everyone else was sitting huddled together around the table. Only Hermione appeared to have continued studying through it all. She looked up and smiled proudly at Draco.

"Did you get them?"

"Yes," he said, "but I'm concerned about how many there were. We should probably hurry this up."

"Maybe we should have two people watch the entrance while we finish," said Hermione. "Ron, Ernie, could you?"

"Is this because we're the only ones here who weren't Ravenclaws or geniuses?" asked Ernie, with a pout.

"I'm not a genius," said Ginny.

"But you still were one of the top in your class," said Hermione. "Yes, Ernie, I have chosen the top studiers to stay behind."

Ernie's jaw dropped.

Terry smirked. "Cutthroat. I like it."

"Are you not offended, Ron?" asked Ginny with her own smirk.

"Nah," he said. "The only reason I got halfway decent marks in school is 'cause Hermy did the majority of my homework. I'd much rather stand guard."

"Thank you, Ron," said Hermione. She looked at Ernie. "Off with you."

He grunted and muttered a few foul things before following Ron towards the entrance.

"You better stop that, baby, or we won't be taking any baths together for a long time!" Padma called after him.

Ernie muttered and grunted some more.

"Love you too!"

"I really think this is the book," said Hermione some time later. She was still reading the same one as before. "It requires both a complicated potion and a spell." She took out her list of ingredients she already planned on taking from the Potions classroom and began adding a few more. She paused, and then looked up at Draco. "Phoenix tears are an ingredient. We'll have to make another trip up to the mountains."

He nodded. "Did anyone else find anything useful?"

Luna raised her hand like they were in class. "Yes. I found one spell that heals damage to the nervous system, but I am not sure if it is strong enough for Harry."

"It's worth a try," said Draco. "Everyone grab what you need. It's time to head out."

"*After* we raid the Potions classroom," Hermione reminded him. She took hers and Luna's books and put them into her bag.

"Yes, love, *of course*," he said, glancing at Ginny. She was already well aware that they wanted to make a Wolfsbane Potion for her, but she was nervous the others would recognize the ingredients they were grabbing. Hermione and Draco promised her they would be as discrete as possible.

Everyone put their cloaks back on and tied the rope around their waists. The moment it was secure, it became invisible again. They began the long walk down to the Potions classroom with Draco in the lead. Hermione moved closely behind him with one hand securely in his and the other clutching onto his arm. As much as she had liked the idea at first, Draco knew he was not the only one worried about how many people they brought. Four, at most, would have been preferred, but they had a lot of ground to cover and little time to do it in. It would not be crazy to say that Hogwarts just might have been the most dangerous places in the world right now.

They got to the Potions classroom all right. Hermione tore off hers and Draco's cloak, untied the rope and went to the cupboard. She immediately began throwing ingredients into her bag. Draco stood close by with her list and used a quill from the professor's desk to check items off for her.

"This is eerie," said Ernie as he took his hood off and began walking around the classroom.

"Uhh, baby, when you do that it still keeps me suffocated down here," mumbled Padma from somewhere beneath the cloak.

"Shh!" said Hermione with her finger to her lips. "The professor's quarters are right next door. We need to be as quiet as possible."

Ernie zipped his lips and turned. He then, unknowingly, ran into the still invisible Luna and Terry, knocking them right into a cauldron that had been left on one of the tables. Luna's small hands reached out of her cloak and grabbed for it but, while she was able to save the cauldron, the ladle spun out of it, falling onto the ground and emitting a loud, echoing clatter as it bounced across the stone floor. Ginny's hand suddenly shot out of midair and froze the ladle, but not before it had

gotten in a few good topples.

They all stood there, unmoving for a moment as they listened with wide-eyes and rapidly beating hearts for anyone approaching. For a second, it seemed like they were in the clear, but then a door opened somewhere close by and footsteps quickly approached them.

Hermione went back into the cabinet and began throwing everything she could get her hands on into her bag. Draco gave up on the list, tossed the quill aside and helped her from memory. As the door began to open, Hermione held her bag wide open and Draco swiped anything and everything inside of it.

Ernie had thrown his cloak back over his head, so the only people Horace Slughorn saw when he stormed into the room were Draco and Hermione standing frozen by his open cupboard.

"Evening, Professor," said Draco, beaming at him. "You look well."

Slughorn gaped at them. He blinked his eyes a few times before finally registering what was happening. He began tugging at his nightshirt, trying to get the sleeve up so he could touch his wand to the Dark Mark that had been placed on his Imperiused body.

"*Expelliarmus*!" called the voice of Ron.

Slughorn's wand went flying and then vanished.

Draco pointed his wand and nonverbally cast *Impedimenta*. Slughorn went flying into the closest walls, where two branch-like hands emerged and held him in place.

"Bloody creepy," said Ron, taking off his hood. Ginny poked her head out next to him.

Slughorn had just opened his mouth to scream when Hermione aimed her wand and, in her head, said, "*Silencio*!"

Draco raised his eyebrows when Slughorn immediately went mute. "Impressive, love. You've already improved immensely."

Hermione grinned. "Thanks."

Draco slowly walked towards Slughorn, assessing his former professor as the old man watched him with fear in his eyes.

"Are you going to remove the Imperius Curse?" asked Ernie, finally just tearing his and Padma's invisibility cloak off of them.

"That depends," said Draco, stopping in front of Slughorn and looking up at him.

"On what?" asked Ginny.

"On how often they check to see if it's still intact or not."

Ginny came out from under hers and Ron's cloak, and stepped forward. "But can't you just cast your own -"

"They know my handiwork," said Draco. He lifted his wand and took a deep breath. If only Hannah were there right now, since her Legilimency skills far outweighed his. Still, he had to try. "*Legilimens*!"

Huh. No shields. Draco supposed no one actually thought the resistance would attempt to sneak in to Hogwarts. Which made sense. It was a bloody stupid idea.

After careful inspection, Draco discovered that they almost never checked to see if he was still under the Imperius Curse or not. Most recently was just last week.

"Looks like it is your lucky day, professor." Draco maneuvered his wand around Slughorn's head and removed the curse. "Welcome back to the real world."

Slughorn blinked. And he blinked again. His eyes not seeming to focus right as he stared at Draco. And then Hermione. Ron. Ginny. Ernie. Padma. Terry. Luna. It seemed everyone had come out from under their cloaks now, the invisibility rope discarded somewhere on the floor.

While they all dealt with him, Hermione turned back to the cabinet and began rechecking her list, making sure they had not forgotten anything during their rush to get out of there.

"Professor … are you all right?" asked Ginny, stepping forward.

"Yes, wha … where … Dear Merlin, how long has it been?"

"Approaching five years now," answered Ron.

"Do you remember anything?" asked Draco, releasing his spell and slowly lowering Slughorn to the floor.

"Yes, I … I remember everything. Just … not time."

Draco cocked his head. "Did they tell you not to forget?"

"No," said Slughorn, shaking his head. "They never told me anything." He stopped and looked closely at Draco. "But Merlin, they've been talking a lot about you."

"*Really*," said Draco with a smirk. "And just what have they been saying?"

"Oh, you know. How much they want to see you executed for your crimes, but Bellatrix suspects You-Know-Who wants to keep you."

"Keep me?" asked Draco, pursing his eyebrows.

"Yes. As his Imperiused puppet. She's hoping to kill you before it ever comes to that."

"Well, aren't you just a bundle of useful information!" exclaimed Ernie. "Malfoy, can we keep him?"

Draco shook his head. "No. If he leaves it will look suspicious. He needs to stay here. But maybe we can come up with some sort of arrangement. Granger, what do you think?"

Hermione glanced over her shoulder at him. She finished checking off the last item on her list before closing her bag and walking over.

"I don't know," she said, stopping in front of Slughorn. "I don't suppose you have a two-way mirror handy, professor?"

"No," said Slughorn. "Wait … you're really going to leave me here? In this death pit?"

"Yes," said Draco. "Now, are you capable of sneaking out if necessary?"

"No. The Dementors will attack anyone but Bellatrix. Don't know why."

Ron cocked his head. "But don't you know the trick -?"

Draco turned and gave him a sharp look. They could not be telling Slughorn he had the capability to ward off Dementors right there on his arm. Judging by the way he was speaking, he would surely use it as a means of escape.

"I don't know what you mean, but they also come and check our rooms each night. The professors, the students, it's all the same to them." He paused for a brief moment, the wheels seeming to be spinning in his head. "But there is one thing, if

you absolutely insist on keeping me here." Slughorn went to the door and opened it. He peeked out. Once he saw the coast was clear, he said, "Follow me."

They all grabbed their cloaks and rope, and headed into the corridor, hurrying to the room next door and running in while Slughorn held it open. He shut it behind them.

Draco looked around to see that they were in his bedroom. It was pretty ordinary, much like the room he and Hermione were staying in at the base. But, then again, why does an Imperiused professor need to decorate?

"I will stay here and cooperate for now," said Slughorn as he walked over to a bookcase in the corner. "But not because you want to sneak back in without them heightening security." He pulled a book and it began to slide open, revealing a hidden door in the wall behind it. "I will stay because of the children. The innocent ones, at least. If there comes a time when we need to get them out, I expect you all to help me." He opened the door, then turned to look at them. "Understand?"

They all nodded.

"Where does that lead?" asked Hermione, looking unsurely at the open door.

"The mountains," answered Slughorn. "As a Potions professor, I often need ingredients from up there, and I imagine all of my predecessors did, as well. I'm not allowed to use it now, but if you need to speak to me, this is the best way in."

Draco created a knock on the door so that Slughorn would know it was a member of the resistance arriving. After they all memorized it, Slughorn shared any information he had that they might find useful, but it was a rare occasion when the Death Eaters actually let anything valuable slip in front of him. He had only heard Bellatrix speaking of Draco by accident. But he promised to try and find out anything he could, as long as they promised to sneak him in some snacks and mead, which was currently lacking in the walls of Hogwarts.

Everyone kept their cloaks off as they walked through the long corridor out of Hogwarts. It took them farther than they wanted to be but, for the future, they needed to know where the exit was.

They ended up coming out in a small cavern way up in the mountains. The snow was falling pretty heavily up there, and it was a bit hard to tell where they were. But a familiar peak a small distance away triggered something in Hermione's memory.

"I think this is where Fawkes found me," she said, suddenly looking around more urgently. "Yes, I'm almost positive it is. He flew from up there." She pointed. "Draco, I think we should go now and get the tears. While we're here."

Draco nodded.

"Sounds like a plan!" said Ernie, coming out from the cavern. "So where should we -?"

"No," said Draco. "We don't need eight bloody people to climb a mountain." The library, he would let go. But this? It was not happening.

"Then Ron and I will go," said Ginny. "If anyone is going to do it then it should not be the two most wanted people in the world."

"No," Draco said again. "Phoenixes are stubborn creatures, and we already know this one has deemed Granger worthy. We can't take any chances by sending someone new. You all need to head back to the base and we'll catch up with you later."

Ginny laughed. "I don't think so. If you insist on going up there without us then we will all wait right here for you to return."

Draco grunted. "But that's stupid."

"What's *stupid*, Malfoy, is that you're always so insistent about not needing any help," said Ginny. "I don't know how you Death Eaters work, but we resistance members help each other."

"Fine, wait," said Draco. "Whatever."

Hermione had already started walking away sometime during the argument and Draco had to run to catch up with her. When he looked back, the others had all vanished, probably into the cavern.

It was a bit impractical to wear the cloak out here, so they went without. Hermione followed a snow-covered path up the side of the peak, and it was not long before they heard a cawing that sounded similar to music. Draco and Hermione looked up to see Fawkes flying overhead.

"Looks like he found me again," she said with a smile.

The bird landed on a branch growing out of the side of the mountain several yards away. They walked over to it.

"Hello again," said Hermione, giving the bird a rub on its head. "I'm sure you remember the boy I was talking about before. This is him." She motioned to Draco. "Your tears worked beautifully. Tell Fawkes thank you, Draco."

"You want me to thank a bloody bird?"

Hermione's eyes sharpened. "Yes! Now, do it before you offend him."

Draco smirked. "Thank you, Fawkes. The potion she made with your tears just might have saved my life."

"It *did* save your life."

Draco smirked wider. He held his hand out to the bird. "May I?"

Fawkes lowered his head, appearing to almost bow as Draco stroked his soft feathers.

"Phoenixes are said to be great judges of character, you know?" said Hermione as she beamed at both of them.

"You said the same thing about your bloody cat and *it* hates me."

"*He* does not hate you, Draco. Perhaps if you were a little nicer -"

"*It* would still bloody bite me."

Hermione frowned. "Well, maybe if you were nicer to everyone."

Draco glanced sideways at her. "Eight people climbing up a mountain was a fucking stupid -"

"I know," she said. "It's just … there are *nicer* ways to say that."

Draco sighed as he continued to stroke the bird. "I *am* trying, Granger."

"I know," she said, taking his free hand in hers. "I just really want you to be happy here."

"I am," said Draco, giving her a soft smile. "But I'll be happier when Theo, Bronson and Quigley are with us. Hell, I even want Pansy out of that fucking city."

"And we'll get them all out soon," said Hermione. "Which brings us back to the here and now." She let go of his hand and went digging through her bag, eventually

coming out with several empty phials. "Fawkes, if I may."

The phoenix tilted his head towards Hermione, and she put one of the phials underneath his right eye. Draco watched in fascination as the bird began to share his gift, one tear at a time.

XXX

Rodolphus sat at the desk in his study, an angry look planted on his face as he once again searched through the files on Baldric Bronson and Zander Quigley. He had suspected that perhaps those were not their real names, but an old Hogwarts class roster proved that the two had attended from 1988 to 1995. Then he thought that perhaps they had stolen these identities, but that proved false too when he found photos of them taken during their time at school. No. These two people truly were Baldric Bronson and Zander Quigley, both with wizard parents but one Muggle grandparent, making them essentially trash in his eyes. All who were not purebloods were.

And then Rodolphus's eyes closed as his mind drifted. Once again, his thoughts were consumed with images of her. Hermione. His precious Mudblood. She had even referred to herself as that when in Draco's form. Of course, he realized she had just been playing the part. One that she had performed well. So well that it had him wondering if perhaps it was all true, that the two of them were, in fact, involved. It seemed hard to believe that the mini Malfoy prick was capable of such feelings, especially with a Mudblood, but Rodolphus understood that she was not like the others. She was a remarkable creature, almost exquisite. Even after years of torture, her beauty never diminished, never ceased.

His precious Mudblood was as breathtaking now as she had been that first night he had her. He remembered watching in a trance-like state as tears dripped from her eyes, pain spreading across that beautiful face as Lucius was given the honor of taking her innocence. As soon as he was finished, Rodolphus had been the first to step in and have her next. Only, he was not selfish with her the way Lucius had been. Making it quick and surely painful as hurried to get it over with.

No, Rodolphus's time with her had never been like that. He never finished until she had first. And while Lucius had the honor of taking her virginity, Rodolphus had the honor of giving his precious Mudblood her first orgasm. He could picture her cheeks flushing with humiliation even now. It was during those moments that he first noticed the light freckles on her nose. Sometimes, at night, he would stay up late counting them after forcing a Sleeping Draught down her throat, so she would stop struggling every time he tried to hold her close.

A knock came at the door and Rodolphus opened his eyes. He only now realized that his hand was in his trousers. He sighed as he released himself. On the name and legacy of Salazar Slytherin, he swore that he was going to get her back. He was going to have her in his bed again and shag her until she was screaming his name. All in due time.

"Enter," he called with his wand to his throat as he zipped himself back up.

His slave came in with a tray of tea and biscuits. She put it on the desk while carefully making sure to avoid looking at his scattered papers, as she understood it was forbidden. Rodolphus stood as she poured him his tea. While he knew that this Muggle filth was nothing compared to his lost treasure, he could not deny that his thoughts of her made him desperate for a little release.

As soon as the teapot was down, Rodolphus grabbed his slave's shoulders and pushed her down so she was bent at the waist over the desk. He did not even check to see if she was ready for him before hiking up her dress, undoing his trousers and thrusting into her. She was as dry as a desert, but he hardly cared when it came to her. Only one slave ever deserved the privilege of always being primed.

Of course, it was not long before she was dripping onto his floor. For some reason, this one always had a desire for him, even when he was rough and brutal, and doing everything in his power just to make her hate him. But she would not.

While Rodolphus did not mind having a personal toy always ready for his enjoyment, this slave was all wrong for him to be able to properly play out his fantasies. Her hair was too light, her eyes too dark, her skin too tan, and her nose was devoid of those perfect freckles he found himself missing almost as much as those amber eyes.

When it was over, Rodolphus pulled out quickly, shoving the slave away from him before zipping himself back up.

"Finished already?"

Rodolphus looked over to see his wife leaning against the doorframe. He would have to punish his slave later with a few Cruciatus Curses for not shutting the door behind her.

Rodolphus touched his throat with his fingers, finally having mastered this spell without a wand. "I have work to do," he said before returning to his desk.

"Yes, I can see how hard you are working," said Bellatrix, stepping into the room and staring down at the slave girl while she straightened her dress. "Do you still find joy out of this one after all of this time?"

"Mildly," said Rodolphus, smirking as he noticed his slave's eyes start to tear out of the corner of his eye. "But we're stuck with her until the Dark Lord says otherwise, so I might as well get some use out of her."

"You! Slave! Why is there only one cup here?" spat Bellatrix. She swung her arm and backslapped her hard. The girl bit her lip to stop herself from crying out in pain, understanding that it would only be worse for her if she did. "Go and fetch another!"

The slave looked to Rodolphus.

"I believe you should do what the old bag says."

"Yes, Master." She nodded and bowed before hurrying out of the room.

"Was your precious Mudblood that compliant?" asked Bellatrix, walking around the desk and sitting down directly in front of him.

Rodolphus continued to work around her with one hand continually held to his throat. "You know she wasn't."

"You have not spoken to me since your encounter with her in the mountains, dear husband. Tell me, what did she say?"
"Nothing. She merely expressed her desire to see us all dead before escaping."

"And she was disguised as Draco."

"Yes."

"Was she believable?"

Rodolphus took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Very much so. She has your prick of a nephew's cynicism down to a tittle."

"Hmm … so she must have spent a lot of 'intimate' time with him then."

Rodolphus opened his eyes and looked up at his wife, wanting nothing more than to wipe that hideous smirk off of her face.

"Listen, *Husband*, I want to make sure Draco is disposed of long before the Dark

Lord ever gets his hands on him."

Rodolphus raised his eyebrows. "Why, my dear, sweet wife. Are you actually telling me you plan on going against a direct order from your beloved master?"

"I was never ordered *not* to kill Draco," said Bellatrix, lifting her nose high into the air and staring down at him through her heavily-lidded eyes. "Only to find him. Dead or alive was never discussed."

"Fine," said Rodolphus. "If you find him I will kill him. Just as long as you convince the Dark Lord to let me keep my Mudblood for more than a night."

"You can keep her forever for all I care," she said, climbing off of the desk. "At least she stayed out of my way. This current burden is even more grating than a house-elf. I don't suppose you will let me dispose of her when the Dark Lord gives us the order?"

Rodolphus waved his hand nonchalantly.

"Have you found anything on these two yet?" asked Bellatrix, picking up a photo of Bronson and Quigley in the stands during a Quidditch match at Hogwarts.

"Nothing," answered Rodolphus. "They went to Hogwarts but there is no indication they knew Draco or the Mudblood. It appears that he truly did just pick them at random."

"Quincy says that when he followed Draco once the good-looking one fancied some male attention." She paused. "You don't suppose my dear nephew …"

Rodolphus chuckled, a horrible, hoarse sound coming through his damaged throat. "Perhaps you should ask your friend Quincy just who it was he was actually following that night."

Bellatrix thought for a moment before her eyes lit up. "Not his precious son?"

Rodolphus smirked.

She squealed with delight. "Who would have thought? Theodore shagging a man, and Draco shagging a Mudblood. The Dark Lord's plan for pureblood reproduction is certainly looking grim."

Rodolphus's face dropped. He knew by the small smile still present on her face that she had said this on purpose. "Draco is *not* -"

"Stop lying to yourself, Husband. Draco is shagging your Mudblood, and it is about time you accept -"

In a rage, Rodolphus swiped his arms across his desk and knocked everything off of it. He raised his fist at her, wanting nothing more than to strike.

"Do it," she taunted. "And then I will let you explain to the Dark Lord why you dared choose to assault his first in command. All over a filthy, Mudblood whore!"

Rodolphus raised his fist higher.

"Master!"

He turned to see his slave standing in the doorway with an extra teacup in her hand. She looked at him with pleading eyes.

"Please don't. Your Lord is already angry with you."

"You do *not* tell me what to do!" shouted Rodolphus, marching forward and using his raised fist to smack his slave hard to the ground. "Now clean up this mess!"

She nodded, sucking back the tears before putting the teacup on the desk and kneeling down to clean up his fallen papers. But then she stopped. Her fingers grazing across the corner of a half-covered photo as a familiar eye popped out at her. She picked it up, her heart stopping as she looked into the face of someone she had not seen in a long time. That she knew of.

"Honestly, I do not understand these slaves," said Bellatrix. "Does she really find this treatment so enjoyable that she wants to stay here permanently?"

Rodolphus shrugged. He had to admit, this slave was a lot more fun in the beginning. He had been one of the first to own her and found himself bored of the fear, so he had decided to try something new. Manipulation. It had been much easier than he expected. A few kind words here, an orgasm there and she quickly became clay in his hands, just ready to be molded. And, now, here they were, maybe six months later and she had somehow become nothing but a pathetic, love-struck bore. Manipulation of this kind would never work on his precious Mudblood. That was just another small part of her appeal. She was unbreakable.

"Master …"

Rodolphus looked over at his slave, unsure if she had even spoken since the word was near silent.

She gulped, her eyes fixed on something in her hand. "Have … have I not been good to you?"

Bellatrix raised her eyebrows. "Come again?"

"I was not speaking to you," spat the slave, finally moving her eyes so she could properly sneer at Bellatrix. Then they were on Rodolphus. "Master, please, tell me. What have I done wrong?"

Rodolphus and Bellatrix looked at each other. "Besides the obvious of being born?" he asked.

"Please, just tell me what I did." The slave crawled on her knees until she was at Rodolphus's feet. "Please, let me fix this! Let me be better for you! I'll do anything! Please, just don't punish me like this!" She grabbed onto his leg and looked up at him desperately.

"What are you going on about?" he asked, trying to kick her off.

But the slave only clung harder. "Master, please! Please, don't hurt him! I'm sorry! I'm sorry if I've failed or disappointed you, but don't hurt my brother!"

"What in the name of Salazar are you talking about?" he shouted, grabbing her hair and pulling her to her feet.

"My brother!" she cried, holding something out to him.

Bellatrix grabbed it and looked closely.

"Why do you have his photo? Please, do not punish him for my failures!"

"This is your brother?" asked Bellatrix, staring intently at a photo of Zander Quigley. "But you're not a witch. Wait. Are you a Squib?"

The slave pursed her eyebrows as Rodolphus let her hair go. "A *squid*? What do you mean?"

"Do you come from a magical family?" Bellatrix asked slowly and condescendingly.

"No," answered the slave, shaking her head.

"And Baldric Bronson," said Rodolphus. "Does that name mean anything to you?"

She looked at him, mouth agape as she blinked a few times. "We grew up with

him. He was our neighbor. It was only a coincidence they both turned out to be wizards. We were told it was a one in a million chance when that old man with the crooked nose came to give them their acceptance letters."

Rodolphus and Bellatrix looked at each other again, their faces stiff for a moment before they finally broke into smirks. "Fucking Mudbloods," said Rodolphus. "Hiding out in London."

"They must be idiots," said Bellatrix.

"Idiots with one hell of a forger. We have *both* looked over their identification papers, dear wife."

The slave stood there frozen, her tan skin going ghost-white as she slowly realized what she had just done. "You're … you're not looking into him because of me?"

"Of course not!" spat Bellatrix. "Like any slave would be *that* important!"

"Come along." Rodolphus put his hand on his slave's shoulder, making her jump. "It is about time you were introduced properly to the Dark Lord." She did not even attempt to struggle as he pushed her towards the door.

Bellatrix laughed joyously as she followed them out, grabbing a photo of Bronson off of the floor as she caught sight of it and putting it behind the one of Quigley. Sometimes, she truly loved their small, beautifully twisted world.

XXX

Hermione and Draco both were in Harry's room. They had setup two tables in there for brewing potions. Draco was currently stirring the Wolfsbane Potion while Hermione worked on the one for Harry's legs, all while Harry watched them closely from his bed.

As soon as Hermione had her last bit of ingredients in her cauldron, she looked at Draco and said, "Let me take that over for now. You need to practice that spell."

Draco nodded and handed off the ladle. For some reason, it had been decided that he would be the one to cast the spell on Harry that went with the potion. He had tried to get out of it by arguing that whole 'only loved ones can cast it successfully' thing, but Hermione pointed out that this was only relevant for the temporary spell they used on him. The truth was, Draco was the best spell caster around. Hermione had spent too many years without a wand and, in that time, he had surpassed her in skill. While it pained her to admit it, Harry's health was the

most important thing, so she caved and took convincing Draco into her own hands. Of course, all he needed was one good shag with the promise of another when it was done.

Draco picked up the book and began waving his wand around, trying to get the movement's just right for when he cast the spell for real.

"When will it be finished?" asked Harry as he gave Crookshanks's head a rub while the cat lay beside him. "Days?"

"No," said Hermione. "In about twenty minutes."

Harry gulped. "That soon?"

"Would you rather it took days?" she asked, looking over at him.

Harry shook his head. "No. It's just … what if it doesn't work?"

"Then we'll try the spell Luna found."

The door opened and Ron walked in. "Is this it?" he asked, holding up her two-way mirror.

Hermione smiled. "Yes. What time is it?"

Everyone looked over at the clock. Two minutes until one a.m.

"We can't really leave to talk to them right now," said Hermione, turning to Draco while continuing to stir her potion. "Do you think it would be all right to let Harry and Ron hear their names?"

"Only if they let me put shields around their minds protecting that information," answered Draco.

Hermione looked at Harry and Ron expectantly. They both shrugged. "If you have to," said Ron.

"Come and take this over, will you?"

Ron walked over and handed Hermione the mirror before taking the ladle.

"Baldric Bronson," she said into it.

"Cupcake!" shouted Bronson the moment he appeared. "And where's my second favorite Death Eater?"

She moved the mirror over to Draco, who sneered into it. "Really? A few bloody snogs and I've been dropped to number two?"

"Yes." Bronson smiled. He was in his bedroom, but started walking out towards the living room. "Oh, and by the way. A couple of friends of yours have made themselves a little too comfortable in Quigs and my once lovely abode."

Bronson moved the mirror over so Draco could see that all of their furniture had been pushed aside. Blaise and Daphne were sitting in the center of their floor with papers all around them.

"There's a lot more space here than there is in the train," said Daphne, smiling as she looked up at the mirror. "Evening, Draco."

"Are they fucking sleeping there?" asked Draco, walking over to Hermione and taking a closer look in the mirror.

"Oh, yeah," said Quigley, who was lying on the sofa that had been pushed against the wall. "For the last two bloody nights."

"Sorry, mate, but they bribed me with cigarettes," said Bronson with a pout. "Now we're in cahoots, I suppose."

"Lucky you!" sang Daphne before looking back down at her papers. Maps of the city, from what Draco could see.

"Yeah, because it's not like we're doing all of this to get his bloody aunt and the others out of London or anything. We're just hanging out for fun," said Blaise. He and Daphne exchanged a smirk.

"And how much will you be charging me for your services?" asked Draco.

"We will let you know just as soon as your vault is accessible again," answered Blaise with a wink.

"Hey, Cupcake, who is that sitting behind you?" asked Bronson.

Hermione turned to find Harry watching them closely. "Oh, right. I've never introduced you." She moved closer. "Bronson, this is Harry."

There was a loud clatter as Quigley, Blaise and Daphne all scurried to their feet. They crowded around the mirror, Bronson looking quite displeased as they all invaded his personal bubble.

"Holy shit, Potter's bloody alive?" shouted Blaise, pulling the mirror towards him.

Bronson yanked it back to the center.

"Thank Merlin!" Daphne said dramatically. "There have been rumors circulating for years that you were dead!"

"No. Still kicking," said Harry. "Not literally." He looked sadly over at the brewing potion.

No one on the other end of the mirror seemed to catch on to his cryptic message. They were all just too excited to see Harry Potter.

"Has Cupcake told you about me?" asked Bronson. "We're kind of like this." He lifted his fingers and crossed them.

"Yes, she's told me about you," said Harry. "I think she has, anyway. She never used names."

"I'm the handsome, quirky and quite loveable chef," said Bronson. He paused. "Some also might consider me charming. I'm charming, right, Quigs?"

"No."

"Yes! Definitely charming!"

Harry smiled. "Then yeah, she has," he said. "Thanks for helping her. Especially all of those times when Malfoy was being a prick."

"Hey!" spat Draco.

"Oh, you have no fucking idea!"

Hermione and Ron looked at each other and laughed.

"And you're the one who taught Malfoy how to make waffles, right?" asked Harry. "Everyone here really thanks you for that."

"Aww, Malfoy, you used my recipe?"

"Could we have waffles *now*?" asked Daphne, her eyes lighting up as she looked at Bronson.

"Ah, yeah, mate!" seconded Quigley. "Waffles! Waffles!"

Blaise and Daphne joined in. "Waffles! Waffles!"

Bronson rolled his eyes. "You see what I'm dealing with here?"

"It's fine, we need to get going anyway," said Draco. "Anything new to report?"

"Give me a second with him, will you?" said Blaise, taking the mirror.

"Fine, fine. Bye, Malfoy! Cupcake! *Harry Potter*!" said Bronson. Daphne and Quigley waved before following him into the kitchen.

"What is it?" asked Draco.

Blaise suddenly looked at him very seriously. "It's Stuart Parkinson. The Dark Lord used Pansy to severely punish him after his failure to capture you. The two of them alternated using the Cruciatus Curse on him and … well, he's not really in his right mind anymore, if you catch my drift."

Hermione gasped.

"Pansy's pretty shaken up about it. More than she thought she'd be. He's locked in the basement at the Dark Lord's manor and she's been spending nights there watching him. I'm worried about her, mate. I think this might be it for her. She's hit her limit."

"You want to get her out?" asked Draco.

"Yeah, with the others," said Blaise. "That's why Daph and I are trying to get this done quickly. But we know she won't go, not with Theo still on the inside, so we were kind of hoping someone from your side could meet them halfway and bombard her. Whack over the head or something and force her to go."

"I'll do it," Hermione volunteered.

Blaise laughed. "I'll bet you would."

"Just come up with your plan," said Draco. "We'll figure something out on our end."

"Right, thanks," said Blaise.

"And do me a favor, and keep an eye on those two idiots for me. They're playing with fucking fire by staying there and I don't need two more bloody deaths on my conscience."

"It's all right, Draco. You *are* allowed to say you bloody care about them, you know," said Blaise, giving him a wink. "Daph and I've got this. We'll talk soon."

"Three days," said Draco. "Have another sleepover."

"Will do. Night, mate."

Draco touched the mirror and was soon staring at his own reflection. Hermione poked her head in next to his.

"Does anyone else really want waffles now?" asked Ron while he continued to stir the potion.

Hermione laughed. "Actually, I sort of do." She went over and retook the ladle from him.

"So Pansy Parkinson is defected?" asked Harry.

Draco tore himself out of his daze and looked at him. "She might be."

"And Theo Nott," said Ron. "If she won't leave because of him then he must be all right."

Draco grunted. He lifted his wand. "Looks like I'm going to have a fun time playing around in your heads."

By the time Draco was finished putting the shields around their minds, Hermione lowered the heat on the Wolfsbane Potion and let is simmer without having to stir. She went back to the other one just as a timer went off.

"Time to put in the last ingredient," she said, glancing over at Harry and gulping. She picked up the phial of phoenix tears and released one single drop into the potion. A cloud of blue smoke erupted from it, emitting a scent similar to the ocean.

"Is it done?" asked Draco, picking up the book again and reading through the instructions.

"I believe so," she said as he walked up beside her. Once they confirmed that everything was complete, she poured some of the potion into a goblet and carefully walked it over to Harry. "Should we wake Ginny for this?" she asked.

Harry thought for a second, then shook his head. "No. We should only wake her if it works. She's sleeping for the first time in weeks and if it fails she'll never be able to get back into it."

Hermione nodded. "Draco, are you ready with the spell?"

Draco waved his arm in the air, practicing a few more times. "I think I got it," he said. "Once you drink the potion, Potter, you'll need to stay completely still."

"Okay," Harry said nervously.

"Ron, could you help him lie down on the floor?" asked Hermione. "It's a bit of an awkward position so I will have to feed you the potion."

Ron put his arms around Harry and brought him down off the bed.

Crookshanks tried to jump off after him, but Hermione said, "Crookshanks, stay," and he obeyed.

Harry lay flat on his back while Hermione kneeled above him. She took a deep breath before carefully pouring the potion down his willing throat. As soon as the last drop was drunk, she backed away and Draco stepped forward.

The spell he performed sounded a bit musical. He waved his wand from Harry's neck all the way down to his toes, all while reciting a long incantation none of them could understand. His wand was just on its way back up to Harry's head when something began tugging on it. Draco continued to perform the spell as an unseen force began wrestling with him for control, but he did not stop, did not waver. A drop of sweat dripped down his forehead as the force became stronger. He fought with it using all of his might, until finally he shouted, "*Depello et Sana*!"

Draco fell back as the force released, a cloud of black smoke freeing itself from Harry's body with a loud, resonating hiss. They all watched as it evaporated before their very eyes.

"Fucking hell," said Draco. "It didn't say anything like *that* in the book."

"Were you fighting with something?" asked Ron.

"I think I was fighting with that bloody smoke!"

"How do you feel, Harry," asked Hermione, leaning over and looking at him.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm sort of afraid to move."

"The horrible smoke monster is fucking gone, Potter. There's nothing for your ugly, scarred head to worry about -"

"Draco, not now!" snapped Hermione.

"Just try and give your legs a wiggle, mate," suggested Ron.

Harry nodded. He closed his eyes and focused all of his attention on his right toes, imagining them moving just like they used to.

Hermione gasped while Draco and Ron were both silent. Harry opened his eyes to see a tear dripping down her cheek. "What is it?" he asked, propping himself up on his elbows and staring down at his feet. His mouth fell open as his toes bended slowly, and then popped straight up again. "They're … they're moving."

Hermione looked at him, her eyes glowing as she nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. Yes, they are!"

"Try the other ones!" Ron shouted in excitement.

Harry nodded. He focused hard and somehow got his left toes to move. At first, they were stiffer than the right ones, but then both feet began wiggling freely.

"They're moving," he repeated, trying to give his right leg a bend. It worked. "They're moving! They're moving! They're bloody - Ah!"

In all of his excitement, Harry had tried to stand, but his legs were still very weak and he collapsed back to the floor.

"In time, Harry," said Hermione, catching him as best she could. "You haven't walked without the aid of magic in almost five years. You'll probably need some physical therapy."

"Who cares!" he shouted. "They're moving! Hermy, my legs! My legs, they're moving!"

Hermione laughed. "I know, Harry. I can see them."

"But I can *feel* them! I actually feel them!"

Harry began to cry as he pulled her closer, hugging her tight. Hermione cried with him, both of them laughing hysterically.

"Oh, I'm getting in on this," said Ron, moving forward and throwing his arms around the both of them.

Hermione looked at Draco and held out one of her arms.

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "I don't think so, love. I'm steering clear of this golden trio hug-fest."

"Draco," she said sternly. "You're the one who cast the spell. Now come hug us."

"No."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. She waved her hand and Draco went sliding on his knees towards her.

"Fucking hell, Granger!" he shouted as she looped her arm around his neck and pulled him into her bosom. "When did you bloody learn to do that?"

"Just now," she said, squeezing him tighter.

Draco grunted. "Fine. I'll hug *you*," he said, somehow managing to wrap his arms around her waist in this awkward position. "Fucking Gryffindors and all of your bloody affection. It sickens me."

Hermione laughed and pulled him closer. "Just relax, Draco, and enjoy this one moment of happiness with us."

Draco sighed. He settled into her a little and tried hard to ignore the fact that she was currently entangled with two other wizards. But she looked happy. They all did. He only now realized that this was one of the few occasions he had actually seen Harry smile since they got here. Because, for the first time in almost five years, the Boy Who Lived finally saw a glimmer of hope.

"Weaselette's going to be bloody pissed when she finds out you didn't wake her for this."

Almost immediately, Harry's smile dropped.

# Chapter 41: Nowhere Man

**A/N: I got nothin'. ;o)**

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"So it says here that sometimes people take on characteristics of the animal they will eventually become when training to be an Animagus. Was that true for you, Ron?"

Hermione looked at him. She was currently walking with one hand holding her book open and the other supporting Harry's waist while he practiced walking around the perimeter outside of the base. Ron was holding up his other side, and clearly doing the majority of the work, since Hermione could not seem to get her nose out of that book.

"I did sprout a tail once," he said. "Professor McGonagall told me it was normal, but getting it to go away wasn't as easy as making it and I had one hell of a time hiding it from my family."

Hermione nodded very seriously as she listened to him speak, making mental notes of things she would want to write down later.

"So do you really want to be a bird?" Ron asked her.

Hermione smiled. "I do."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Birds have always sort of signified this sense of freedom to me. I suppose that's it."

"Well, it can't be the flying thing," said Harry. "If you don't like brooms or Hippogriffs then I doubt you'll like wings."

Hermione crinkled her nose at him. "I don't think that's true. With wings I'll have a sense of control."

"You have control on a broom," he said.

"But my balance is off," explained Hermione. "When I fly it myself I always tilt."

Ron laughed.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Oh nothing. I was just imagining your head on a bird's body flying with a *tilt*."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Have you even told Ginny yet that you're the fox who goes around with her?"

Ron's smile immediately faded. He and Harry glanced sideways at each other. "No," he said.

"And why not?"

"Because she'll bloody kill me when she finds out!" he shouted, his eyes widening. "I faked stupidity with the rest of my family when she told us. If I go back on that now -"

"Then she might be angry initially, but then she'll be happy to know her brother loved her enough to do that for her."

"What, like a few years down the road after she finds some other reason to be angry at me?"

Hermione smiled. "Exactly."

They all chuckled.

"So you still have never shown me your transformation. Can I see it?" she asked.

"I guess so," said Ron.

He and Hermione looked around until the found a rock Harry could sit on. They guided him towards it, but he let go of their shoulders and walked the last few steps on his own. It had only been two days since Draco had done the spell, but Harry had already improved immensely.

Hermione sat down on the rock next to him, closing her book and putting it away in her bag. She watched Ron closely as he stood in front of them and closed his eyes. He began to shrink as orange fur covered his entire body, his nose and mouth extending into a long snout. His clothes fell into a pool on the ground and, soon, a small fox with black, sock-like paws and a bushy tail emerged.

Ron the fox did a lap around the rock they were sitting on and then jumped into Hermione's lap. She laughed and gave his fur a stroke before he jumped off again. He crawled into his clothes. When he changed back again, he was able to keep his clothes on, though his head did end up through one of his sleeves.

"I'm still working on that one," he said as he straightened his jumper and stuck his head through the proper hole.

"That's a neat trick. Did McGonagall teach you that?" asked Hermione.

"No," said Ron. "I don't know how, but she can actually get her clothes to change with her. That's why her cat-form has the markings from her glasses."

Hermione nodded. "Draco and I have lessons with her tonight. You should come too, Harry."

"I'd like to," he said. "There wasn't much reason for me to learn before, but if this spell sticks -"

"It *will*, Harry," said Hermione. "You need to have more confidence in yourself. Like you used to have."

They all went silent for a moment. Hermione stared at the snow falling just outside of the barrier. While she understood it was beneficial for there to be no snow around the base, she had not seen or truly experienced snow in years, and she found herself craving a good run through it. Nose runny, cheeks flushed, fingers frozen and teeth chattering, but it was all worth it. In fact, that was the fun of it.

"We should have a snowball fight," she found herself saying out of the blue.

Ron looked at his watch and checked the time. "Well, we can't have one now. It's nearly half past already. We should head back."

"Yes, Professor Malfoy will be *very* upset if we're late for class," said Harry, smirking at Hermione.

She smirked back, taking one last look at the smooth, white blanket of snow before standing.

Harry stood up on his own, but Ron and Hermione were quick to put their arms around his waist. He threw his over their shoulders and the three of them slowly walked towards the training grounds.

When they got there, Draco was already standing in the center of it, talking to Ernie and Padma. Ginny and Hannah were just arriving with several trays of food that they set up on a table near the edge of the trees. Since they still had duties, they figured serving a bit of lunch outside would allow them some time to properly absorb Draco's lesson.

Draco looked at Hermione as she approached. "Ah! There's the mastermind who somehow manipulated me into doing this!"

"You seem to enjoy pretending that manipulating you is difficult," said Hermione with a smirk.

"Well, it is for anyone but you," he said, grabbing her hand and pulling her away from Harry. "Excuse me, Potter. I need to give my girlfriend a good snog before this potential disaster commences."

"By all means," said Harry, but Draco was not listening. His tongue was already deep down Hermione's throat. Both Harry and Ron grimaced before turning away. They walked over to where Dean, Michael, Terry, Justin and Seamus were all standing. Harry tried to stand with them for a few minutes, but Ginny eventually showed up with a chair for him.

Susan, Luna and Lavender set up blankets on the ground for everyone else to sit on. George, Angelina, and Arthur all walked into the training grounds, with Charlie and Fleur holding onto Victoire's hands and swinging her behind them.

A few others showed up. Including, to Draco's complete surprise, a couple of Cormac's usual lackeys.

"What are *they* doing here?" asked Hermione, moving her body in front of Draco's and immediately going into protection mode.

"I told them to come."

Hermione, Draco, Ernie and Padma all turned to see Katie standing behind them.

"*You* told them?" asked Hermione.

Katie smiled. "Sort of. The big one, Gavin, is Holly's boyfriend and -"

"Holly?" asked Draco.

"Holly Perry," said Katie. "From my platoon. I told her, Toby Crawford and Baxter Dalton that they had to come. Gavin came to be with her, and I told him to spread the word that for anyone interested in Anthony's spot, coming to your D.A.D.A lessons were a requirement. We see the most action out of all of the platoons so, of course, that whole bloodthirsty group has been bugging me about it since the moment we put Anthony's body in the ground."

Katie's eyes became cold as she stared over at them.

"You're not *really* going to let any of them into your platoon, are you?" asked Ernie.

"Of course not," she said. "I already told Kingsley I want Michael, but if this is what it takes to get them to cooperate then I don't see a need to make a formal announcement just yet." She glanced at Draco and smiled wickedly.

Draco smiled back, his hand instinctually going into his pocket and stroking the locket he had in there. Hermione had told him what Katie had said about his father. He had a million questions for her but the opportunity to ask them had not presented itself yet. She always seemed to be surrounded by people, and now he knew why. They could not even wait for Anthony's body to be cold before bothering her about filling his spot. While Draco was fully aware he was not selfless, he sure as hell was not as insensitive as these pricks. What they were doing was just callous.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy," said Kingsley as he walked into the training grounds with McGonagall. "I hope we're not late for your lesson."

"I wasn't aware the two of you would be attending," said Draco, suddenly feeling a bit nervous.

"No wizard or witch is ever finished improving their magic. I'm curious to see what you have to show us." Kingsley smiled.

"I do hope you plan on teaching the spell that looks like a Killing Curse," said McGonagall.

"Maybe in an advanced lesson for the few who actually know nonverbal magic," said Draco.

"Are we ready to start?" asked Ginny, walking over with Hannah.

Draco nodded. Hermione leaned up and gave him a kiss before going over to sit next to Ron and Harry. Everyone else took their seats and soon only Draco and Ginny, his assistant for the day, were standing in the center of the training grounds.

"There are more of you than I expected," said Draco, looking around the training grounds. *A lot* more, actually. "I'll keep this introduction brief. On Mondays and Wednesdays I will be teaching all of you basic defensive skills against Death Eaters. There will be no offensive magic but, if there is enough interest, I am willing to find a day to teach more advanced spells. That being said, today I will be

teaching you two fairly simple techniques. One is channeling someone else's magic when you have been disarmed, and the other is the proper way to bind a Death Eater so they cannot break free. If there is anything particular you would like to learn during these lessons, come and see me after. Weaselette, are you ready to help me demonstrate?"

Ginny nodded. Draco handed her his wand as if he had been disarmed, and slowly began going through the steps on how to channel magic. Everyone paired off and Draco went around, helping the people who needed it. When he went over to help Fleur, Victoire attached herself to his leg and would not let go. He ended up having to finish the lesson with the extra weight.

"Hey, Dwaco, who's dat?"

Draco followed the little girl's finger to where someone was standing, watching them through the trees. When the person's eyes locked on his, they turned the brightest shade of red before trying to bolt. Draco grinned widely.

"Hey, McLaggen!" he called. "If you want to listen to my lessons then be a good boy and come stand in here with the rest of the class!"

Cormac froze. He turned slowly to see that all eyes were on him. "I can't take your fu -"

"Ah! Child, McLaggen. Watch your language," said Draco, pointing down at Victoire.

Cormac gulped and started again. "I can't take your lesson, *Malfoy*, because I don't have a bloody wand."

"Are you saying you would be in here if you did?"

Cormac took several deep breaths through his nose as he stared down at the ground. "I might be. I told you before that I'm a fighter."

"And this has nothing to do with Goldstein's spot in Bell's platoon?"

He took another deep breath. "Do you really think I would be fu - bloody chosen for that?"

Draco pursed his lips. "Hmm. You're right. Well, if you're willing to put aside our differences for the next hour," He held out his wand, "then go ahead and give it a whirl."

Cormac looked at Draco's wand skeptically. He began inching forward, all eyes still on him as he walked through the trees. He reached Draco and slowly took his wand.

"Just remember, if you curse me then you're out, so behave yourself." Draco turned and began walking the other way with Victoire still attached to his leg. "Weaselette, run a few rounds with him, will you?"

Ginny let out an exasperated sigh. She nodded and went over to help Cormac. While passing Draco, she whispered, "You are nice at the strangest moments, Malfoy."

Draco winked and kicked her bum with his free leg so she would walk faster.

Once everyone pretty much had channeling magic down, Draco put Victoire on his shoulders and used Ginny's wand to demonstrate binding.

"The reason this is so affective is because not only is it difficult to remove, but if done unsuccessfully it will leave deep gashes in your flesh and, yes, even your bones. If you don't mind blood or pain then, by all means, try and break free."

Everyone practiced the spell, but only Cormac's lackeys attempted to remove it, in some stupid attempt to prove themselves. Padma unhappily came to their aid once they began bleeding all over the place.

"Are you going to be teaching us how to remove them?" asked Ernie.

"No," said Draco. "If done correctly then even I cannot remove these binds."

This spell took a little more time for everyone to learn. Once the lesson was finished, the training grounds cleared out with everyone who had not already eaten grabbing food along the way. Fleur came to collect Victoire, but the little girl clung to Draco with a much tighter grip than he thought possible, kicking her mother as she tried to take her away.

"Looks like you 'ave some competition, 'Ermy," said Fleur with a giggle as Hermione walked over.

Hermione frowned. "Well, that's not fair. There is no way I can compete with an adorable three-year-old."

Charlie laughed. "That three-year-old is a lot less adorable when she whines like this."

"Vickie, I'll tell you what," said Draco. "If you go with your mother now then I will let you be my assistant on Wednesday. Would you like that?"

Victoire's eyes lit up. "Yeah!" She happily leapt off of his shoulders and into her mother's waiting arms.

"You will not be burrowing any rope eento my daughter's skeen, will you?" asked Fleur.

"Nothing I'm teaching on Wednesday will be painful," said Draco.

Fleur nodded and walked away with Victoire and Charlie.

"Have I been demoted?" asked Ginny, walking over with Harry's arm around her shoulders.

Ron smirked. "I think you were demoted the moment he partnered you with McLa - "

"Your *wand*."

They all whipped around to see Cormac standing just behind them. Draco took the wand, but without receiving a thank you for its use, he saw no reason to give one for its return.

After Draco had it back, for some reason Cormac continued to linger there. He began shaking his leg while staring off to the side. Everyone looked around awkwardly, unsure of what they were supposed to do.

Finally, Cormac let out a huff of air and said, "A while back, I saw a Death Eater cast this spell. It was before I gave in to using the Killing Curse, and I sometimes went a little blast happy. Anyway, he protected himself with this glowing blue armor. Do you know it?"

Draco crinkled his brow. "Yes," he said.

"I want to learn it."

Silence.

"You said to tell you if we wanted to learn something and this is me doing that," said Cormac with flaming eyes. "I *want* to learn that spell."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Forgive me for pointing out the obvious, McLaggen,

but you told me to stay out of your way. How am I supposed to do that when you want me to teach you?"

Cormac grunted. "This is the exception to the rule. Don't talk to me and don't come near me any other time, but I want to learn and I think the fact that I'm even standing here now proves that. So teach me!"

Draco smirked and shrugged. "It may be a defensive spell, but it's advanced magic. Can you cast spells nonverbally?"

"Yes," said Cormac.

Draco cocked an eyebrow.

"I can! Basic ones, anyway."

"Okay," said Draco. "Work on that and I'll consider letting you in on any advanced training I do."

"How am I supposed to do that without a wand?"

"Ask Shacklebolt if you can have yours back," said Draco. "If not then figure something out yourself."

Cormac grunted again before turning away from him. When he did, Lucy appeared in the entrance of the training grounds and began looking around until her eyes fell upon him. It was obvious by the expression on her face that she was not there for him. Cormac hurried past her to where his lackeys were waiting. They all laughed as he ignored her and followed him as he stormed off.

As soon as Lucy caught sight of Ron, he groaned and hurried off in the other direction.

"Ready to get back to the kitchen, Malfoy?" asked Ginny, helping Harry move his weight from her shoulders to Hermione's.

Draco frowned. "Fuck no."

"Well, too bad," she said with a smile. "Come and help Hannah and me clean up this mess, will you?"

Ginny and Hannah walked over to the messy table they had laid out. Draco turned to Hermione and gave her a kiss. "I'll see you later," he said.

She nodded before she and Harry walked off to find Ron.

"That went surprisingly well," Harry said to her.

"I know." Hermione smiled in relief. "Thank Merlin."

<div align="center">XXX</div>

It was late, nearly ten when Draco, Hermione and Harry finally left McGonagall's chambers after their Animagus training. So far, little progress had been made, but McGonagall promised them that it would become easier over time. Under her tutelage, Ron had learned in under six months, and she had confidence that all of them would be just as successful, if not more so.

"We should go outside," said Harry as Hermione helped him through the halls. After walking all day, he was finally getting to the point where he only needed one person's shoulders to lean on. "Take a quick walk around the base before bed."

"Would that be all right, Draco?" asked Hermione, looking over at him.

Draco nodded. She knew he was tired, but he wanted Harry to be healed just as much as anyone. She smiled at him and took his hand.

The three of them walked outside and Harry immediately started heading for the training grounds. Hermione and Draco did not question it, and let him take the lead. When they got there, Hermione froze. The first thing she noticed was that the entire area had been covered with a thick blanket of pure-white snow. The second thing she noticed was the group of people facing them, each with a snowball at the ready.

Harry used his free hand to reach into his pocket. He pulled out three pairs of gloves, and handed one to each Hermione and Draco before slipping the last pair onto his own hands.

"Harry, what is this?" asked Hermione, staring blankly at her gloves. Draco was already hurrying to put his on, especially when Ginny started tossing her snowball up and down, looking right at him and giving him a knowing wink.

"You told me and Ron earlier that we should have a snowball fight, so here it is."

Hermione smiled.

She put her gloves on and, the moment the last one was in place, Harry let go of her and shouted, "Every man for himself!"

Draco and Hermione darted out of the way of the immediate bombard of snow. Harry ducked down but was still hit with quite a bit of it. Everyone began running around, some of them making a ton of snowballs and stocking up while others just kept making one and throwing continuously.

Ginny ran and tackled her boyfriend into the snow, knowing very well that he could not play in the same way everyone else was. But Harry tried. He moved on his knees and got everyone that passed him.

Instead of making a ball, Ernie grabbed two large handfuls of snow and dumped them both on the top of Padma's head. She immediately began chasing him, looking quite determined. Luna made her snowballs into shapes. Draco would never forget the moment a snow duck flew at him, quacking as it splattered on his cloak.

Ron made around twenty snowballs and gathered them all in his arms. He started chasing George and Angelina around, hitting them hard with each throw. Eventually, George threw himself on his wife in a gallant move and both were left as sitting ducks when they landed hard on the ground.

When Harry's legs started to get shaky, even with him on his knees, he hobbled over to a nearby rock and sat down, happily watching the chaos transpiring around him.

Ron snuck up behind him and smashed his last snowball on his head before taking a seat beside him. They both watched as Draco chased Hermione in front of them, both of them laughing as he tackled her to the ground, stopping for a moment to share a tender kiss. But it was quickly ruined when Hermione grabbed a handful of snow and gave it a good smash into his platinum-blond head. Draco immediately retaliated, holding her down while he tossed some snow into her laughing face.

"She's going to be all right, you know."

Harry glanced sideways at Ron. He smiled as his friend continued to watch Hermione, no longer looking angry as she and Draco lay in the snow together, sharing another kiss that would not be ruined by their competitive nature this time.

"Yeah, she is," he said. "Hard to believe we have Malfoy to thank for that."

Ron laughed. "I know, right? The bloody prick going and taking *our* job."

"Hey! Voyeurs!"

Harry and Ron both blinked and looked at Draco.

"Stop watching us bloody snog and get back in it!"

Draco used his wand to make a giant snowball and sent it flying in their direction. They both darted out of the way.

"Draco, be nice!" scolded Hermione, even though there were obvious traces of humor in her voice.

Draco and Hermione stood back up, and soon they were in a two-on-two battle with Harry and Ron.

It was a good hour before their game finally died down. Several people headed to bed, but those still wound up stayed outside. After clearing the training grounds of snow, those who were left all sat in the center of it. They chatted happily for a while, and everyone slowly began to trickle out until only Draco and the golden trio were left.

While Hermione talked with her friends, Draco lay on his back and stared at the surprisingly clear sky for this late January night. He searched for the constellation he was named after. As a child, he had always considered the constellation to be his legacy, but as an adult he finally realized his insignificance in relation to it. Millions of people stared at that cluster of stars every night, most did not even know its name, but those that did surely never thought of *him* while doing so. He was nothing.

Insignificant.

To all but one, that is. The girl sitting beside him. To Hermione he was something. Someone important. And that was greater than any legacy he may have fantasized about as a child.

As Draco continued to stare at the constellation, his arm began to burn terribly. He ignored it, but just knew a message was there waiting for him.

Hermione placed her head over his, blocking the sky as she stared down at him. Her face glowed in the starlight and his mind could not help but drift to the tales of goddesses his mother used to read him as a child. She was his goddess and he was her knight, sworn to protect her from all that was evil and give her the happy life she deserved.

"Are you about ready to head in?" she asked.

Looking at her like this and staring into her twinkling, amber eyes, Draco immediately began thinking about how much he wanted to marry this girl. But 'someday' just did not seem soon enough anymore. His arm burned hotter and he clenched his fist to keep himself from screaming.

"Not yet," he said, sitting back up. "Potter, I wanted to ask you something."

"Okay," said Harry, glancing unsurely at Hermione.

"I'm over here, Potter."

Harry moved his eyes back to Draco. "Sorry." He paused. "What did you want to ask?"

"I'm just curious," said Draco. "Why do you think you lost against the Dark - You-Know-Who?"

Harry's face tensed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you lost a battle you should have won. Right versus wrong, good versus evil, love versus hate, all that crap. You did everything right, so why the fuck are we all stuck in this crappy dystopian world?"

"I haven't seen any dinosaurs," said Ron.

Draco, Hermione and Harry all looked at him with crinkled brows and open jaws. "Idiot," muttered Draco.

"I have an idea why I lost," said Harry. He looked at Hermione again. "I think we missed one."

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Missed one what?" asked Draco.

Silence.

"Is this another bloody golden trio secret?" spat Draco. "I think I've already more than proven myself to be trustworthy. Spill it."

More silence.

"Granger!" he snapped. Merlin, his arm hurt.

Hermione looked at him and sighed. "Have you ever heard of a Horcrux?" she

asked.

"No," he said. "What is it?"

Hermione glanced at Harry and waited for him to give her a nod of approval before going on. "A Horcrux is an object that is used to hold a hidden fragment of a person's soul. It is very dark magic and can only be created after the evilest of acts has been performed."

"Okay," said Draco. "And why exactly would someone want to hide a fragment of their soul?"

"For immortality," said Harry. "As long as a Horcrux exists its creator cannot die."

Draco froze, his jaw dropping slightly. "So are you telling me that You-Know-Who - ?"

"Created a Horcrux," finished Harry. "No. He created seven. Six intentionally and uh … *one* unintentionally." He pointed at himself.

Draco's eyes widened.

"But creating them is horribly damaging to one's self," said Hermione. "Tearing your soul apart makes it incredibly unstable. The fact that You-Know-Who made seven is already unbelievable. How could he possibly have made an eighth?"

"*Hellloooo.* Evilest wizard of all time, remember?" said Ron.

"It's the only explanation," said Harry. "I should have won, I should have beaten him, but I didn't. Because I couldn't. When our wands were locked, I could feel that something was wrong. I knew I was going to lose before it even happened. The only reason I'm alive now is because I was supposed to win and our wands knew it. Even when his Killing Curse broke through, I was protected from it. I should be dead but I'm not, and there is only one explanation for why that might be."

Hermione was silent. The intellectual in her did not want to believe it. It was impossible, illogical, and just plain immoral for Voldemort to have created eight Horcruxes, even if one was accidental.

"So I'm assuming you destroyed the other seven," said Draco.

Harry nodded. "Yes. That's where we were all of seventh year. Searching for them."

Draco suddenly remembered something. "That diadem you were looking for in the Room of Requirement. Was that a Horcrux?"

Harry nodded again.

"You-Know-Who only chose objects that were meaningful," said Hermione. "Rowena Ravenclaw's Diadem, Helga Hufflepuff's Cup, Salazar Slytherin's Locket -"

"What about his ring?" asked Draco.

"Yes. Marvolo Gaunt's Ring was destroyed by Dumble -"

"Who?" asked Draco, cocking an eyebrow. "No, I'm not talking about some blighter named Marvolo's ring, I am *talking* about the *Dark Lord's* ring." He did not even bother to correct himself this time. "The *emerald* ring he always wears on his pinky finger."

Hermione blinked. Draco looked at Harry and Ron to see that they had similar vacant expressions planted on their faces.

"Are you honestly telling me not one of you has ever noticed that he *always* wears the same ring? It is his one and only piece of jewelry. No watches, no necklaces, no bracelets, no bloody earrings or those Muggle nose things. There is just one thing, *one* thing, and that is the ring. His *girlfriend's* ring."

Now, Hermione, Harry and Ron all pursed their eyebrows and crinkled their noses, each one looking completely perplexed.

"*Girlfriend*," repeated Ron. "Since when has the bloody snake-man had a girlfriend?"

"He does not *have* a girlfriend, Weasel, he *had* one. When he was in school, but she died in his sixth year and, *somehow*, he ended up with her ring." Draco paused as they all continued to gape at him. "Are any of you reading between the lines or do I seriously have to spell this out for you?"

"A Horcrux can only be created by the evilest of acts …" said Hermione, her face falling back into a normal expression but her eyes still vacant as she traveled into her own mind. "*Murder. That* is what has to be done to create one, and I wouldn't put it past the evilest wizard of all time to kill his own girlfriend for his own selfish gains."

"He told me once that she is dead because she loved," said Draco.

Hermione's face scrunched up again as she suddenly looked repulsed.

"Boy, did she ever make the wrong choice of boyfriend," said Ron.

"You really think the ring could be a Horcrux?" asked Hermione, looking hopefully at Draco.

He shrugged. "You're the experts. You tell me."

They all looked at Harry.

"There's nothing else that comes to mind?" he asked Draco. "When we say 'something meaningful', you automatically think of the ring?"

"Yes," said Draco. "There's always been something I never liked about it. Just looking at it makes me feel cold. Depressed even."

Harry nodded. "Well, that's one problem solved. Now … if he always wears it, then how exactly are we supposed to destroy it?"

And *that* was a question Draco could not answer.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

"Hey, Quigs! What's taking so bloody long?" asked Bronson from the back of the restaurant kitchen.

Quigley, who had been staring through the small window on the door into the dining room, turned towards him. "It's those bloody Death Eaters who sat in my section. They're taking their sweet time with a bottle of wine and fucking Sheehy is too chicken shit to tell them to leave." He rolled his eyes. "Some bloody manager."

Bronson looked at his watch. "Well, our *favorite* houseguests will be at our place soon and I don't want to leave them waiting in the hall."

"Just go," said Quigley, turning back to the door and staring out the small, round window at the two Death Eaters slowly sipping their wine. "It's not like they can keep me here past curfew. I'll be there soon."

"You sure?" asked Bronson. "Because I really have no problem making the *Zabinis* wait."

"It's fine," said Quigley. "You're right, we shouldn't leave them waiting in our hall. Not when they're bloody exiled children of Death Eaters."

The hostess, Jenna, walked by as he said this. She stopped and cocked an eyebrow. "You two have some *really* sketchy friends, you know?" She smiled. "I like it." Jenna went to the backdoor and pushed it open. She turned and pressed her back against it. "You still coming to my place tonight?" she asked, looking at Quigley.

"Nah, can't tonight," he answered. "Thursday?"

Jenna rolled her eyes. "Yeah, whatever. Make me wait for it." She winked and exited.

"I thought you two called it quits months ago?" asked Bronson as soon as she was gone.

"Yeah, well, when you're stuck in a city as secluded as London, you're kinda forced to repeat the same mistakes. If you wanna shag, at least. She may be mental but at least she's fun."

"Ah, a philosophy to live by! Brilliant, Quigs! Simply brilliant!"

"Oh, just bloody piss off already, will you?"

Bronson smirked. "Fine, fine. I'll see you at home." On his way to the door, Bronson grabbed a bottle of wine. "Going to need this to get through yet another night with Mr. and Mrs. Blaising Fire."

Quigley laughed. "That is an awesome name, though," he said. "*Blaise.*"

"Definitely better than Baldric," said Bronson as he walked out the backdoor.

It was another twenty minutes before the Death Eaters finally left. Quigley locked up, since the manager had given up on doing any actual managing that night. He then threw on his pea coat, scarf and gloves before running out the door. He had forgotten his cloak earlier and was really regretting it in this cold weather.

Even while running at full speed, Quigley was unable to make it to the Knight Bus stop before it took off. He tried to wave it down, but it was too late, and that was the last one of the night.

"Shit!" he shouted as he kicked the gravel. Only twenty minutes until midnight, and he lived a solid three kilometers away.

Quigley heard some shuffling behind him and he whipped his head to look. Two people in dark cloaks were walking in his direction. Something about them did not sit right with him. He quickly headed in the opposite direction, determined to get home no matter how fast he had to run.

He had barely gone a block when someone else walked into his view. This person was closer, and he immediately recognized the Death Eater robes they were wearing. Quigley diverted his path down a side street.

After running through it, he came out on a new block, but stopped when two more people were standing directly in front of him. The same two as before. How had they moved so fast?

Quigley turned, but the other Death Eater was directly behind him. He jumped.

"Shit, you scared me!" he said, trying to play like everything was normal. But everything was not normal. Something was off. These Death Eaters were here for a reason, and he was pretty certain that reason was him.

The one directly in front of him did not say anything, but they pulled back their cloak to reveal the face of a woman with a strong jaw and heavily-lidded eyes. Quigley immediately recognized her as Draco's aunt.

"No cloak tonight, boy?" asked a male voice as a strange hand grasped firmly onto his shoulder. He turned his head and this time recognized Theo's father. Well, the gang was all here! Now all that was missing was …

"Here," said a raspy voice, even colder than the London air around him. "Take mine."

Quigley's head turned in fear as he suddenly came face to face with Lord Voldemort. He was frozen in place as the snake-like man took off his cloak and positioned it onto Quigley's shoulders. More than anything, he wanted to tear the thing off of him, but he bit his cheek and focused on the pain to fight back the urge.

"It is terribly late for you to be out. Would you like a ride?"

Voldemort held out his hand just as a Thestral-drawn carriage flew onto the paved road. The door opened and Quigley could feel himself being shoved towards the dark abyss. Voldemort stepped in first, followed by Quigley, who was unsure if he should draw his wand and fight or not. Were they here to kill him? Or were they just questioning him?

The moment Quigley was inside of the small carriage, their motives became all too clear. His gaze fell upon the bruised girl sitting at the end of the bench across from him, her eyes cast shamefully downwards as the man beside her stroked her knee. She whimpered as Quigley was forced into a seat between the Dark Lord and Quincy, Bellatrix coming in last and shutting the door before taking the last seat.

"Have you met my husband, Rodolphus?" asked Bellatrix, grabbing the arm of the man sitting beside her. "Ignore his disfigurement." She ran a single finger across the scar on his throat. "Some filthy, little Mudblood did that to him." She smiled. A horrible, eerie smile that sent chills from the back of Quigley's neck all the way down to his toes.

"And this is his slave," said Voldemort, motioning to the beaten girl with his own eerie smile. "What did you say your name was again, Mudblood?"

She clenched her eyes shut and sniveled, several tears dripping down her cheeks. Her mouth barely moved.

"Speak up, slave!" spat Rodolphus, raising his hand to strike her.

Quigley was about to leap forward to stop him but, before he could, she opened her eyes and shouted, "Fiona! My name is Fiona!"

"And your surname, dear?" asked Bellatrix as she leaned over her husband's legs.

Fiona whimpered again. She finally found the courage to look at Quigley and mouthed the words, "I'm sorry."

"No, I don't think that's it," said Bellatrix. She pointed her wand at Fiona's throat. "Say it."

"It's Quigley," said Fiona, looking sadly at her brother. "My name is Fiona Quigley."

"Very good," said Bellatrix. "You may pleasure my husband as a reward for your obedience."

Fiona's eyes widened. "What?"

Bellatrix began undoing Rodolphus's trousers while he grabbed the girl's head and pushed it downward.

"No!" Fiona shouted as Bellatrix's hand slipped into the opening. "No! No! No!" She pulled her head back against his hand with a great force. Rodolphus released

it and she smacked her head hard against the window, causing it to crack.

Everyone in the carriage but Quigley laughed.

"It seems she does have a sense of humility," said Rodolphus in a raspy voice as he held his hand to his throat. "Any other guest and she would have been happy to do it."

"Young Zander, you can see why we might have a problem," said Voldemort, gazing across the carriage at Fiona, her body shaking as she stared at the blood that was now on her fingertips from her wounded head. "You have lied to me and my Death Eaters for years, pretending to be something you are not. When, in fact, you are just another filthy Mudblood. No better than that siren who has stolen one of my top servants." He took a deep, rattling breath through his snake-like nose. "But there is a way we can mend this, you and I. As you can see, *I* have something you want right here in my fingertips."

Voldemort reached a hand across the carriage and ran it through Fiona's hair. Her lips quivered as she fought hard against the urge she had to move away.

"And *you* have something I want. So you can see how this will be beneficial to both of us."

"What do I have that you want?" asked Quigley, gulping to relieve his dry throat. He had never been more terrified in all his life. One wrong word and not was only his life at stake, but his sister's life, as well.

"Information," answered Voldemort. "On Draco Malfoy and his Mudblood. You know where they are."

"No," said Quigley, shaking his head. "I don't, I swear -"

"But you can find out," said Quincy. "And we would like you to do just that."

"No, I can't!" insisted Quigley. "I don't know where he is! He just disappeared from upstairs one day! I swear that's all I -"

The carriage came to a rough stop, sending only Quigley and Fiona flying forward.

"We're here!" announced Bellatrix, opening the carriage door and heading out first. The others all followed, Quincy pulling Quigley while Rodolphus dragged Fiona.

Quigley stepped out to find that they were in front of his flat. He looked up at it and gulped. Thank Merlin their balcony faced the back so Bronson could not see them.

"Before we part, young Zander, I would like to remind you that, with your sister in my possession, I can do just about anything I want to her whenever I please." Voldemort raised his hand high and waved someone forward.

A Death Eater he did not recognize stepped out of the shadows, pushing someone who was bound with a black bag over their head. They pulled it off and Quigley gasped.

"Jenna!"

"Zander, what's going on?" she cried. "I don't -"

In a movement too swift for even Quigley's eyes, Voldemort lifted his wand. "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Jenna's eyes widened for one moment of clarity before she fell stiff onto the ground. Fiona screamed and tried to cover her eyes, but Rodolphus forced her to keep staring at the dead girl on the street.

"So much for Thursday," said Bellatrix with a chuckle.

"Everyone, back in the carriage," ordered Voldemort.

Rodolphus dragged Fiona away first. Quigley tried to grab for her, but the Dark Lord stepped in his way. "Just remember, Zander. I made it quick for this girl. I will not be as generous to your sister. You have two days to find a way to get me the information I need. If not then I am afraid you will be the end of the Quigley family bloodline."

Fiona screamed her brother's name as she was thrown into the carriage. The others all followed in after her.

The newest arrival picked up Jenna's dead body and threw it over his shoulder. As he passed Quigley, he said, "Say hello to my daughter Daphne for me, will you?" He winked before walking into the carriage, Jenna's lifeless arms dangling over his back as he did so.

Quigley did not wait for the carriage to fly away before running inside. He darted up the stairs, threw open the door to his flat -

"Hey, Quigs! About time you got -"

- headed straight to his bedroom, and slammed and locked the door. He did not want the others to see him cry.

"Quigs?"

Bronson knocked on the door but he ignored it. Quigley went over to his window and threw it open. He had torn the screen off years ago and heavily breathed in the wet air. He grabbed his pack of cigarettes off of his desk. Only one left. As he hurried to light it, his quivering lips accidentally released and it plummeted towards the ground.

"Shit!" he cried.

"Quigs?"

Quigley whipped around to find Bronson standing behind him. "I locked the door for a fucking reason!" he shouted.

"I know," said Bronson, taking his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and offering it to Quigley. There was only one left. He hesitated for a moment before finally taking it. "Is there something you want to talk about?"

"No!" said Quigley, frantically shaking his head.

"Of course, we both know that you're lying."

Quigley closed his eyes. "Please, just go."

"All right," said Bronson, half-turning towards the door. "But we're going to talk about this in the morning." He gave him one very serious nod. "And don't you dare drop that last cigarette! That's fucking gold and you need to savor that shit!"

Quigley smirked halfheartedly. "Thanks."

Bronson nodded again and left, leaving Quigley to be consumed by his own thoughts. Never in his life had he been presented with such a horrible catch-22. There was no winning this. He either had to lose his sister, or betray his friends. Both were family to him, especially Bronson, so how was he ever supposed to choose between family members? The truth was there was no choosing. No matter what, he was fucked.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Long after the snowball fight, Draco was laying down in his and Hermione's bed while she sat beside him, making a few last adjustments in her notebook. It was the first of the month soon and she had not completed the February work and room assignments yet.

"I am just going to keep us in the same room, Draco. It seems ridiculous to move all of our stuff for a few extra square feet."

"All right," he said without looking over at her. He gave his arm a rub.

Hermione paused. She glanced sideways at him. "Are you not going to fight me on this?"

Draco shrugged.
"What's wrong?" she asked, tossing her notebook aside and curling up next to him. "Are you not feeling well or -"

"No, I'm fine, Granger. I just … Something is off."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Something's wrong. Not with me, but somewhere. I can feel it." Literally. "The end is coming."

"What are you a seer now?" she asked, attempting to smile as she rolled on top of him.

"I'm serious," said Draco, wrapping his arms around her waist. "The reason I asked Potter why he thought he lost is because I know something is coming. We need to be prepared and we're not."

Hermione's face became white. "Draco, you're scaring me. We've finally just found happiness here. Why are you so sure something is -?"

"Because it is," he said. "Something *is* coming, Granger, and it is the Dark Lord. He has a plan now. He didn't before, but now he does."

"But *how*, Draco? *How* do you know?" she snapped, her eyes becoming angry. "What aren't you telling me?"

Draco sighed. He reached his left arm up and stroked her hair. Then he set it down in front of her and pulled the sleeve back, revealing his Dark Mark which now had a large, black 'X' through it.

Hermione gasped. When she touched it, the snake protruding from the skull wriggled and hissed. Draco winced in pain as new, black words formed on the bottom of his forearm, irritating the skin around them

*Soon, Mudblood.*

"Shit!" shouted Draco, pulling down his sleeve.

"It knows it's me?" Hermione asked, sitting up so she was straddling him.

"I don't know," he said. "He's been trying to send me messages since we escaped but I've always been able to ignore them before. But I can't ignore this. He *has* a plan, Granger, and the last thing we need is to be caught with our tails between our legs."

"Well …" said Hermione, looking up in thought. "Then the solution is simple."

"And what is that?" asked Draco.

Hermione looked down at him and smirked wickedly. "We prepare for war."

# Chapter 42: Don't Let Me Down

**A/N: So my goal all along has been to finish this story by the end of September. It's looking good! *cheesy smile and two thumbs up***

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Two mornings later, Draco's Dark Mark was burning again. In an attempt to distract him from the pain, Hermione immediately took off all her clothes and then tore off his. She tried to take charge but, with the burning only growing stronger, Draco ended up tossing her on all fours. Hermione grabbed onto the headboard, her fingers clenching tightly around it as he slowly entered her.

At first, Draco tried to be sensual, pulling her hair aside, kissing her neck, moving his hands to caress her hips and breasts, but when the pain on his arm became more intense, so did his thrusts. Before long, his hips were moving faster than they ever had before, and when he grabbed onto the headboard, the bed began banging hard against the floor and wall. Draco's own grunts were so loud he did not even know Hermione was coming until she gushed around him.

Wanting to see her face come undone for the next one, he flipped her onto her back, tossed both legs over his shoulders and thrust back in. Hermione clung to the sheets, her nails ripping through them as Draco only moved faster and harder. She opened her eyes and looked up at him, his body glistening with sweat and his teeth clenched tight.

"Put my legs together," she ordered, wanting to feel him tighter against her walls.

Draco obeyed immediately, grabbing her left leg and flipping it over his head and onto his left shoulder, all while never breaking pace.

Watching her eyes roll back in her head as she moaned loudly was all Draco needed to take his mind off of his arm, and focus on the much more valued part of his body. He loved watching her breasts bounce wildly as he moved faster still.

Wanting to get a taste of them, he twisted her torso and pressed her legs down on the bed, leaning onto her and taking her left breast into his mouth, thrusting brutally but still managing to gently graze his teeth across the nipple.

"Mmm …" Hermione bit her lip, loving both the rough and gentle sensations she was being given on different ends of her body.

His hips still moving at lightning speed, Draco's hands became sensual again as he ran them up her body, stopping to clutch tightly onto her bushy, tangled, sex-hair. He moved her legs so they were separated and wide, letting him get that

much closer to her.

Draco finally left her breasts and moved up so he was looking into her eyes. Her entire body was as wet and sticky as his, and when she tried to run her hand up to his, it slipped and touched the burning mark on his arm. She was going to move it, but Draco shook his head, as he was actually enjoying the pain in this moment.

"Say it, Granger," he ordered while still looking down into her amber eyes.

Hermione moaned louder as he readjusted his angle once more, hitting her clit with every brutal thrust. "I love you, Draco," she said, moving her other hand to stroke his cheek.

He grabbed it and kissed it. "I love you too," he said.

Draco's lips fell onto hers, and the two snogged senselessly as their orgasms hit them hard. Even after his release, Draco kept moving until there was absolutely nothing left inside of him. Then his body slowed as he settled himself on top of her, his kisses becoming tender but his lips never stopping.

"Better?" she asked breathily into his mouth, her hand gently rubbing the tattoo on his arm.

"It always is with you," he said, holding her cheeks between his hands as he continued to kiss her, refusing to stop even as someone began knocking on the door.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

They both ignored it.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

Draco grunted.

*KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.*

"We're fucking busy!" he shouted at the person on the other side.

"Yes, I can hear that," called the voice of Ginny. "*All* the way down the hall. I tried to wait but it's almost five, Malfoy, and there's already a line to try out for your advanced lessons. We need to get started, unless you *want* to be doing this all day."

Draco grunted again. "Give us a bloody minute!" He looked down at Hermione and sighed. "Sorry, love."

"It's fine," she said. But then she crinkled her nose, giving Draco a good look over before staring down at her own sweaty body. "I don't suppose we have time for a shower."

"You don't!" Ginny called.

Hermione chuckled and rolled her eyes. She released Draco's arm and he slowly sat up, grabbing her hand and pulling her with him. They did a quick spell to clean their sex-covered bodies and got dressed, Hermione helping Draco into an armband she had knit so no one would accidentally touch Draco's mark.

Her tangled heap of sex-hair had little hope, though, and she ended up breaking their brush as she tried to run it through. With a frown, she eventually settled for a messy bun on the top of her head and the two of them walked out of the room. Ginny was standing just on the other side of the door smiling with Harry just beside her. He definitely was not smiling. In fact, he looked mortified, his cheeks flushing as he refused to look either of them in the eye.

"Sorry," said Hermione with her own blush.

"I'm not," said Draco with a smirk.

"Perhaps a Silencing Charm next time," suggested Ginny.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Forgive us for not realizing people would be walking by our door at five in the morning."

"You knew we were starting this early!" snapped Ginny.

"Yes, and if I'm going to get through this day then I needed the distraction." Draco unconsciously stroked his left forearm.

Harry and Ginny looked down at it. "Is he still sending you messages?" asked Harry, his face becoming tense.

"No," said Draco. "It's just burning."

They all began walking down the hall, Harry no longer needing anyone's assistance but still moving slowly as he let the others take the lead.

"I wonder why he's just doing this now," said Ginny.

Draco shrugged. He had been wondering the exact same thing.

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*"Say it,  Granger."*

*"I love you, Draco."*

*"I love you too."*

Rodolphus was mute, his ears becoming muffled as the sounds of their moans became louder. He could not listen anymore, could not bear it. A tear fell down his cheek as he lifted his hands to cover his ears, but *her* voice kept ringing in them.

It was Bellatrix who had discovered this trick. Thanks to Quincy's rather curious collection, they still had a piece of the Mudblood in their possession. Mixing that with a piece of Draco they had obtained and a potion his wife had created, which was somehow directly linked with the Dark Mark, meant that they were now able to tell whenever she was touching him by the scent of roses emitting from the basin they had mixed it all in.

Their hands had been interlaced recently, and Rodolphus had become so enraged that he marked an 'X' over Draco's Dark Mark. Bellatrix had been furious, since Draco, undoubtedly, now knew about the connection. When his wife had gone to bed, his precious Mudblood had touched the mark directly. He had sent her a warning, hoping it would keep her away from him, but it did not.

All last night, they had been touching, then this morning the smell of roses grew stronger, meaning they were closer yet. Rodolphus and Bellatrix had been experimenting with different methods to try and get a direct link inside of his head, sight *and* sound, but the Mudblood had not touched his mark in days and they were unsure if it had worked. But then she did, and Rodolphus had been woken from his slumber to the sounds of her moaning … and *his*.

Rodolphus's eyes darkened as he thought of Draco on top of *his* Mudblood. There had been no visual, and he found himself thanking Salazar that they had failed in that experiment. But the sound was enough. He had never heard her scream like that before.

*"Sorry, love."*

Rodolphus snapped back to reality, turning his head towards the basin as the words he had heard during their moment of passion finally hit him. They loved

each other.

*"It's fine. I don't suppose we have time for a shower."*

Her voice … It was the same but, somehow, so different from the one he had always known.

And then it all stopped. She must have removed her hand.

Rodolphus charged over to the basin and splashed his hand through it, knowing this would make Draco's arm burn. He wanted him to burn. He wanted him to burn in *HELL*! He took out his wand and was just about to write as much on Draco's arm when the door opened. Bellatrix walked in, looking at Rodolphus curiously as he stood there with his arm raised. She smirked.

"Did something happen, dear husband?" she asked.

"No," said Rodolphus, lowering his wand and giving it one spin through the basin. "Just giving him a little early morning irritation."

"Has your Mudblood touched his arm?"

"No," he said calmly.

"Did you smell roses all night?"

"No!" he spat, his eyes going wide as he looked at his wife. "Do you smell them now?"

"That means nothing," she said, walking over and looking into the basin. "Before long, they are going to give something away, and we will be able to dispose of my nephew once and for all."

"You mean if the Dark Lord's plan fails?"

Bellatrix went tense.

Rodolphus smirked. "Any word from my slave's Mudblood brother?"

"No," she said. "He has not come forth."

He looked up at a clock. "I suppose he has a few more hours before the Dark Lord tortures and kills him."

At that moment, both of their marks started burning. The Dark Lord was calling

them.

Bellatrix smiled. "Maybe that's him now." She waved her wand over the basin, casting a spell that would record anything it heard or saw in their absence.

"Are you ready, husband?" It was only then that she looked him up and down, realizing he was still dressed in his nightshirt. "Perhaps you should meet me there."

Bellatrix left the room, and Rodolphus quickly changed into some normal clothes. Before walking out, he looked over at the basin, his mind once again flooding with the sounds of their passion.

*"I love you, Draco."*

Never had his heart ached more than it did in that moment.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Lord Voldemort sat at his conference table, watching as his Death Eaters began to file in. Bellatrix was the first to take her seat, even before Lucius and Arron who were staying in his home and had no excuse to be late. When Pansy and Theo walked in together, he watched them closely. They both noticed and Pansy smiled at him. He smiled back, though it could hardly be considered warm.

Bellatrix noticed the exchange and immediately began staring daggers at the girl. She did not trust the little tart, but she knew the Dark Lord's fondness of her was growing. Especially after that whole ordeal with her father. She tried to explain to him that Pansy was not unaffected, and that she never went home anymore, choosing to sleep down on the cold, basement floor to keep Stuart from hurting himself. Theo had been down there with her last night, and neither was looking their best.

Pansy and Theo sat down. Everyone was silent as the last of the Death Eaters came running in. Rodolphus took his seat next to Pansy and she glanced sideways at him. His eyes seemed a little red and she wondered if he had been crying. It certainly looked like it.

Everyone watched closely as the Dark Lord leaned forward in his chair, folding his hands in front of him. "I have just received word that six resistance members and a child have been hiding out in our city since the day the curfew took effect."

Pansy's breath hitched.

"One of them is Andromeda Tonks, formerly Black." Voldemort glanced at Bellatrix, who raised her eyebrows.

"My sister, my Lord?"

"Yes. They are hiding in the Weasleys' shop in Diagon Alley, and it is said they have a direct link to Draco. We will go now."

The Dark Lord stood up and immediately began walking towards the door. Everyone looked around, shocked for a moment but still standing and following him. Normally, he took more time to formulate a plan, but if all of them went then six resistance members held little chance.

Theo watched as Pansy hung near the back, not following with the rest of them but running off while no one but him was watching.

Pansy ran into the closest washroom and slammed the door. She took the small mirror out of her pocket and said, "*Cogita*!"

No one showed. She tapped it impatiently as she stared at the door. She did not have long if she was going to catch up.

"Come on!" she shouted.

And as if he heard her, Bronson suddenly appeared. "What *the fuck* do you want this goddam early?" he asked groggily.

"Bronson, the Dark Lord has found out about Andromeda!"

Bronson shot up. "What?"

"He's found out about her and the other resistance members. I don't know how but he's on his way there now with *all* of his top Death Eaters! You need to get there! You need to warn them!"

Bronson nodded. "I'm on it."

The mirror went out. Pansy put it back in her pocket before running out of the washroom. She jumped when she ran into Theo just outside of the door.

"An emergency?" he asked, raising a single eyebrow in a way that reminded her of Draco.

"Yes, I had to pee," she said, gulping to relieve her dry throat.

"That's funny. I didn't hear the toilet flush."

Pansy froze. "Whoops!" she exclaimed before running back inside and giving it a flush. She walked back out. "I guess I forgot in all of the excitement."

Theo stared curiously at her. "Don't forget to wash your hands next time," he said before walking off. Pansy let out a breath of relief and hurried after him.

In Bronson's flat, he was rushing around, trying to get clothes on while continuously calling Quigley's name.

"Quigs!"

No answer.

"Quigs, get the fuck out of bed!" he shouted, leaving his room and going over to bang on Quigley's door. "We have an emergency! Quigs!"

He opened the door and was surprised to find the room empty. He took a good look around, but there was definitely no one here.

"Quigley?"

He went back into the main room and checked in the kitchen. No one.

The balcony door opened and Bronson turned to see Quigley walk inside. "Were you calling, mate?" he asked, smelling of menthols, the last type of cigarette in the entire city. They were useless as far as Bronson was concerned.

"Get dressed, we have to go," said Bronson, straightening his jumper as he went back into his room to grab his shoes and cloak.

"What? Why?" asked Quigley, following him.

"The Dark prick has found out about Andromeda. He's on his way now and we have to warn them."

Quigley went white. "H-how did he -?"

"Find out?" finished Bronson. "I don't know, but we're on a bit of a time crunch so hurry."

Quigley ran into his room and quickly changed, throwing on his clothes, the first cloak he saw and shoes. When he got back out to the main room, Bronson was

already waiting by the front door.

"Is that a new cloak?" his friend asked as he approached.

Quigley looked down at it, his heart nearly stopping as he remembered where he had gotten it. The Dark Lord. "Oh, uh … yeah."

Bronson stared at it for a moment. Then he smiled and said, "Looks good."

He ran out the door with Quigley at his heels. Luckily, their flat was much closer to Diagon Alley than the Dark Lord's manor, and if he really was bringing everyone then they would not be taking the Floo.

Bronson and Quigley got to the Knight Bus just as it was arriving, jumping on and paying a few extra Galleons for it to go to their stop first.

It was a matter of minutes before they arrived outside of the Leaky Cauldron, going inside and running through it, not even caring that they looked suspicious to anyone watching.

It was still very early and they were able to run through the shadows until they arrived in the alley behind Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. Bronson did the knock and it was a good two minutes before Oliver answered.

"Is everything all righ -?"

"No," interrupted Bronson as he pushed his way in. "You-Know-Who is on his way here with all of his top Death Eaters as we speak. You all need to get your things and get out of here. *Now.*"

Andromeda, who had been descending the staircase, went completely still. "Is that true?"

Bronson nodded. "Yes. Only grab what you need. We don't have much time."

She nodded back and ran upstairs with Oliver just behind her.

Bronson took out his little mirror and shouted, "*Cogita*!" into it. Blaise and Daphne had not answered before, and he wanted them to be prepared for the oncoming arrival. "Quigs, go watch the window upstairs! Let us know if you see them coming!"

"Bronson, I … I have to tell you some -"

"Tell me later, Quigley, just go!"

Quigley gulped before nodding slowly. He disappeared up the stairs.

"*Cogita! Cogita! Cogita*!"

Finally, Blaise appeared in the mirror, his eyes only half-open as he asked, "Do you have *any* idea what time it is?"

"Sorry to cut your beauty sleep short but we have a problem."

Blaise's eyes snapped fully open. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"You-Know-Who has found out about Andromeda. We need to get her and the others out immediately. Quigley and I are already here, and we'll be heading your way with them short -"

"Bronson, they're coming!" Cho shouted from the staircase.

A loud blast sounded at the front of the shop and Bronson's head shot up.

"We'll prepare on our end!" shouted Blaise. "Just get out of there alive!"

Bronson nodded as he darted up the stairs. He put the mirror back in his pocket and ran to the back room, where everybody was already waiting. The door slammed behind him, and Cho, Neville and Kennil immediately started casting several Locking Charms on it.

"Is this really happening right now?" asked Dennis in a panicked voice.

There was no time for any of them to take a moment and answer him.

Andromeda pushed one of the bed's aside and opened the hidden door in the floor they had created in preparation for this. A crash sounded in the front room. All of them turned their heads to it, listening as dozens of sets of footsteps stampeded around in there.

Quigley jumped into the hidden door first and held his hands out for Andromeda to hand Teddy down to him. Then she took his hand and he helped her get down. Oliver lowered Cho to him and was about to jump down himself when something hit the door with such a force it cracked. And then it hit again.

"Shit!" shouted Bronson.

Oliver jumped down. Kennil slowly walked over with his wand at the ready. He jumped in.

Another blast and the hinges of the door began to rattle. Bronson looked at the hidden door and was suddenly hit with a crossroads. While he could jump down and make a run for it with the others, leaving the door exposed like this would not give them much of a head start. What they needed was more time. A distraction. Bronson knew right then that there really was no choice. He knew what he had to do.

He walked over to Neville, who was just crouching down beside the hidden door, and handed him the mirror from his pocket. "Give this to Malfoy. Tell him to say '*Cogita*' into it for help on the inside."

Neville blinked. "What?"

Without another word, Bronson shoved him into the hidden door and grabbed the latch.

Quigley ran forward. "What are you doing?"

"Get them out of here, Quigs. We can't let that son of a bitch win."

Bronson pulled the door and slammed it shut.

"NO!" shouted Quigley, already trying to jump back up and grab the handle.

"Quigley, don't!" said Cho, grabbing at his arms. "There's no time to go back! We need to move!"

Kennil and Oliver each grabbed one of his arms and they all started running down the hidden passageway that would lead them to the underground. Quigley screamed for Bronson the entire way.

Back in the Weasleys' shop, Bronson returned the bed to its rightful place. Another blast hit the door and he knew it was only a matter of seconds before they were in. He positioned himself to the side of the door and readied his wand.

When it finally blew open, several Death Eaters ran inside. When he saw none of them were Theo or Pansy, he shot a Killing Curse into the herd, instantly killing one of them. And then he shot another.

When they charged for him, Bronson put a shield around his body that Draco had taught him, and then continually shot blasts into the growing mound of Death

Eaters as they began to corner him against the wall.

One of them hit him with a blast that sent him flying those last few feet back into it. He hit it hard and fell to his knees, barely getting a moment to breathe before one of them was hitting him with the Cruciatus Curse. He dropped all the way to the floor and began writhing in pain. He knew then that while they were definitely trying to hurt him, it seemed they were not going to kill him. Not yet, anyway.

"*Cruci* -"

"Stop!" called a hissing voice. "*Expelliarmus*!"

Bronson's wand flew out of his hand. He sat up, doing his best to act unaffected by the curse he had just been struck with. If Draco could handle thirty-nine of them then he could surely handle one. His eyes first fell upon the bottom of perfectly creased, black robes, hitting the floor at just the right length so he could not make out any shoes underneath. He followed them up until he came across a white neck. He gulped. Soon his eyes were on the thin, lipless mouth, snake-like nose and, finally, the scarlet eyes of Lord Voldemort.

"Search the room," he ordered. Several of his Death Eaters immediately began tearing it apart.

"What should we do with him, my Lord?" asked a woman with wild hair and heavily-lidded eyes beside him. Draco's aunt.

"Keep him alive," ordered Voldemort, using his wand to bind Bronson's wrists together. "The more incentive we have to bring Draco back, the better."

"What makes you think Malfoy sees me as any sort of incentive?" spat Bronson from the floor.

"Over here, my Lord! We have found a door!" one of the Death Eaters called.

Lord Voldemort turned to them and nodded. "Macnair, take ten men with you and follow them through the door."

Macnair nodded, pointed at ten other Death Eaters and disappeared into the hidden door.

"Rowle, come and take our prisoner here back to the manor."

"Yes, my Lord," said Rowle, stepping forward. He grabbed Bronson's bound wrists and pulled him to his feet.

Voldemort stood straight and stared evenly into Bronson's eyes. "For your sake, you better hope that he does."

Not caring anymore, Bronson spit in the Dark Lord's face.

Bellatrix gasped before cleaning it off with her wand. "How dare you!"

She pointed her wand and Bronson but Voldemort lifted a hand, motioning for her to lower it.

"Take him away," he ordered.

Rowle began dragging a struggling Bronson towards the door.

"Rodolphus, you will lead the rest of us to the Black Market. If we move quickly, we just may make it there in time to meet our guests."

Bronson stared over his shoulder at him with wide, unbelieving eyes. Voldemort smiled in return.

On his way out, Bronson passed right by Theo and Pansy, who had been searching the front room with several others. They both turned to look as they heard the footsteps, Theo successfully looking unaffected by his presence but Pansy turning white.

"Nott, come help me with this prisoner, will you?" called Macnair, who was having some trouble moving Bronson along as he tried to make it as difficult for him as possible.

"Gladly," said Quincy, who had been standing on the other side of the room. He smiled at his son before hitting Bronson with the Cruciatus Curse.

"What did I say?" hissed Voldemort as he exited the back room just behind Rodolphus.

"Forgive me, my Lord," said Quincy. He stunned Bronson while the curse was still in effect and Macnair levitated him. The two of them slowly guided his floating body out of there, Quincy taking one last look at his son, who stared coldly at him in return.

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Neville poked his head into the alleyway their hidden passageway led to and made sure the coast was clear. When he had confirmed it was, he motioned to the

others and they all stepped out. They began running the two blocks to a different alley. This one had another hidden door in the wall that led them right into King's Cross Station.

It was still early and the place was practically empty. Only a few vendors were there setting up their booths. They walked through them and headed straight into the train, not stopping until they were met by the two large wizards standing guard at the entrance of the last coach. The door was opened for them without hesitation.

"Thank you," said Andromeda, holding a crying Teddy close to her as they all ran through. All of the compartments were closed except for the third one on the left. They went into it and found Blaise scanning a large piece of parchment on the counter while Daphne threw several supplies from one of their cabinets into a backpack. They both looked over as everyone entered.

Daphne immediately ran to them and slipped the backpack onto Dennis's back. Then she grabbed another already packed one and gave it to Cho. "Those have any supplies we need. Just in case," she said. "At this point, we don't have a set plan so it's best to be prepared for everything."

"Where's Bronson?" asked Blaise.

Quigley's face tensed. He turned away quickly. Andromeda looked at Blaise and shook her head.

He sighed deeply. "Longbottom, come here."

Neville walked over.

"We're taking two maps in case we get separated," explained Blaise. "You'll take this one and I'll have the other. Any of these paths marked in green we can take. They are longer routes but, without Pansy, we can't risk going through Dementor territory. There is a key at the bottom for all of the passwords for hidden doors and pathways. To scout ahead, you will wave your wand like this." Blaise demonstrated. "And then say '*Speculatum*'."

A glowing, gold orb appeared in front of him.

"Send this forward down new paths and it will warn you of any oncoming trouble. Got it?"

Neville nodded confidently. "Yes."

"Are we all ready?" asked Blaise, making the glowing orb disappear.

This time, everyone nodded.

"All right then. Let's move out."

Blaise folded up the extra map and put a band around it so Neville could carry it over his shoulder. He opened the trapdoor behind the counter. Andromeda and Teddy walked in first, then Cho, Oliver, Dennis, Kennil, Quigley, stealing a glance behind him, and Neville.

Daphne was just reaching for the other map hidden in their cabinet when someone appeared in the doorway. She turned just in time to see Rodolphus Lestrange shoot a Disarming Spell at her. Once he had her wand, he bound her.

Blaise slammed the trapdoor shut, casting a spell to seal it before he was disarmed, as well. The spell used against him was stronger, and he went flying back against one of his shelves, covering his head as several items made of glass crashed around him. When everything finally stopped falling, he noticed his wrists had been bound, just like his wife's.

"Get that door open!" ordered a chilling voice.

Blaise looked up to see Lord Voldemort enter their compartment. He gulped. How had he found them?

"What's with you people and all of these bloody doors in the floor?" asked Macnair as he and Rodolphus headed over to where the door had been just moments before. They both looked around.

"There is nothing here, my Lord," said Rodolphus.

"What do you mean there is nothing here?" demanded Bellatrix as she pushed her way into the small compartment. "We just saw -"

"I know what we just saw, *dearest*," Rodolphus said scornfully. "But there is *nothing* here."

Bellatrix went over to where the door had been and began stamping around. When nothing happened, she aimed her wand at the floor and blasted a hole in it. Macnair dropped to his knees and looked through.

"It is just the train tracks, my Lord. It leads nowhere."

"That is impossible!" shouted Bellatrix. "Antonin, Gordon, get out there and find them! They must be running along the tracks!"

Blaise smirked. "They're not."

Bellatrix took the two steps she needed to get to him in the small space and smacked him hard. "Filthy blood traitor! What would your poor, late mother think?"

Blaise's face dropped. "What do you mean late?"

Now it was Bellatrix's turn to smirk. "Why, didn't you know? I killed her just last year. After your whore of a mother tried to convince my husband to leave me and become, what was it, husband number ten for her? Twenty? I suppose it doesn't really matter. She may have been pureblooded, but the Zabinis have always been trash as far as I am concerned."

"Bellatrix, stop playing with the boy and take the two of them back to the manor," ordered Voldemort.

Bellatrix looked over her shoulder at him and raised her eyebrows. "Are we not going after them, my Lord?"

"Not yet," he said with a wicked smile. "They will be moving quickly now. It will not be long before we have them exactly where we want them."

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Back at the Dark Lord's manor, Bronson blinked several times as the feeling of something cool pressed against his forehead. He opened his eyes and could make out the silhouette of a woman leaning over him. When they began to focus, the dark eyes of Fiona were suddenly looking down at him. She removed a rag from his forehead and dipped it into a bucket beside her. Then she placed it back on his forehead, once again cool and soothing.

"Fiona …" he whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"This is where they're keeping me now," she said. "Ever since they found out about Zander."

Bronson blinked a few more times. He looked around to see that they were on the inside of a stone cell, the only other occupant seeming to be a rather loony man muttering to himself in the corner.

"Ignore him," said Fiona. "My master told me that he is nothing but a failure."

"What … what do you mean since they found out about Zander?" asked Bronson, looking back at her. "Found out what?"

Fiona sighed. "I was worried he didn't tell you. I found a photo of him among my master's things, and accidentally gave away that the two of you were Muggle-borns. I didn't mean to do it!" she defended. "I may be bloody pissed at you but I certainly didn't want you to end up in here."

"What are you talking about?" asked Bronson, moving her hand away from his forehead and sitting up. "*What* didn't he tell me?"

"That the Dark Lord made him an offer. My life in exchange for information leading to the capture of that traitor. I believe his name was Dracko or something, I don't know."

"Are you saying Quigley took this deal?" Bronson looked at her unbelievingly.

"I. Don't. Know," she said slowly. "I told you, they've kept me down here ever since, but he certainly didn't take it when I saw him, even after they killed his girlfriend, or something, right in front of him."

"Girlfriend? What girlfriend?"

"I believe he called her Jenna."

Bronson went white. "Jenna's dead?"

"Yes," said Fiona. "And unless Zander acts immediately, you and I are dead too."

"When did you become this cold?" demanded Bronson, looking at her with disgust as he stumbled to his feet.

"I'm not cold, Bronson, I'm practical," she said, rising with him. "Why should we lose our lives to protect some traitor? He's helping a Mudblood who slit my master's throat!"

"Since when do you use words like this?" he snapped, his face turning bright red as he got in her face. "Mudblood, the Dark Lord, *Master*! *These* people destroyed our world, Fiona! They made you a prisoner!"

"I was not a prisoner until you and fucking Zander got involved! I had my master! I was fine! And now I've been taken away from him!" Fiona's eyes began to tear. "If I've lost him forever because of you then I will *never* forgive you!"

"I don't fucking care anymore," said Bronson, turning his back on her. "You're bloody brainwashed, Fiona. This man treats you like shit. He has threatened your brother and will probably kill him!"

Fiona shook her head. "He won't! As long as Zander gives them what they want then they'll let him go! You can take my freedom because I don't want it! I want to stay here! With my master! I love him and I am *not* losing him!"

"You disgust me."

Fiona turned bright red, her eyes flaming as her fists began to clench. She lunged forward and pushed Bronson hard, knocking him into the bars and then proceeding to hit him over and over again.

"Don't you dare judge me you bloody fag! You were the only man I ever loved before him and *you* left me! My own brother chose his friendship with you over me, even knowing how much you hurt me!"

"It's been five fucking years, Fiona!" shouted Bronson, grabbing her wrists and holding them still. "Get over it!"

"I hate you! I *fucking* hate you! I HOPE ZANDER HAS BETRAYED YOU AND YOU *FUCKING* DIE!"

"That can be arranged."

They both froze, their eyes moving over to see Rodolphus standing at the bottom of the staircase. Fiona pulled her hands away from Bronson and stepped back. "M-mast -"

"You never told me your history with this one, slave," said Rodolphus. "I thought he was just your neighbor."

"He …" She gulped. "He was."

"Step back, will you?"

Fiona obeyed.

Rodolphus bound Bronson's wrists again before opening the cell and pulling him out.

"Quigley has *not* betrayed me!" Bronson spat at her as he was dragged away. "I can't wait for the day you finally realize what a psychopath you've become!"

"You're welcome for that," said Rodolphus, blowing Fiona a kiss before pulling Bronson up the stairs.

He dragged him until they entered a large drawing room. Death Eaters were standing all around, seeming to be staring at something in the room's center. As they got closer, Bronson could see that there were two other people there, both bound and trying hard to keep a brave face. It was Daphne and Blaise.

"Well, if it isn't Baldric Bronson," said Voldemort, who was standing just behind them with a wicked smile plastered on his hideous face. "The Mudblood who has somehow slipped through our fingertips for several years now. Do you know the Zabinis?" He put a hand on both Blaise's and Daphne's shoulders.

"No," said Bronson.

"Oh, but we all know that you are lying," said Voldemort. "How did you meet?"

"We haven't," answered Bronson, refusing to look in Pansy's direction, even though he could see her standing next to Theo out of the corner of his eye.

Bellatrix frowned beside the Dark Lord. She stepped forward, giving Bronson a pouty lip. "Now, Baldric, if there was ever a time to come clean about all of the lies you have been spreading it is now. So, tell us the truth, you met them through Draco, didn't you?"

"No," he answered. And *that* was not a lie. "I met them through Granger." But that was.

Bellatrix grabbed Bronson's jaw and held it an inch away from her face. "But you met the Mudblood through Draco?"

"No," he said again. "She approached me on her own."

"But Draco -"

"Is Imperiused," finished Bronson. "He has been for years. Ever since he first came into contact with his aunt Andromeda in the Black Market. He informed them of Granger's escape and was given the task of finding and aiding her. Draco is nothing but her puppet. She had fun torturing him in all of the same ways you Death Eaters did to her over the years."

Bellatrix's eyebrows furrowed as her grip on his jaw tightened. "Stop lying, you filthy -"

"That is enough, Bellatrix," ordered Voldemort. "It is evident that we will not know what is true and what is false until Draco is back with us."

"I don't understand," said Blaise, turning so he could see the Dark Lord. "Death Eaters have betrayed and left your forces before. Why is Draco so important to you?"

Bellatrix was about to smack him for speaking out of turn when Voldemort lifted his hand. "Stop, Bellatrix. Perhaps it is time we share something with our brothers and sisters." He motioned around the room.

"My Lord, no -"

"It is time you all understood why it is so important we bring Draco back here. To be one of us again. And why we *must* keep him alive."

Voldemort walked over to the fireplace and waved his wand, filling it with large, orange flames. He twirled his wand around and the fire began to circle. He guided it spiraling into the center of the room, everyone backing away as he placed it where all could see. It continued to spin while he reached into his head and pulled out a silver thread, dropping the memory into the flames.

There was a burst of light and then three flaming figures emerged.

*"Hit her again, Bellatrix."*

*"Yes, my Lord. Crucio!"*

A woman screamed as Bellatrix hit her with a Cruciatus Curse so powerful her body began to spasm, orange flames flowing out of her head that could only have been blood. It was obvious she was near the end.

*"You must give us another prophecy, Trelawney,"* ordered Voldemort's flaming figure. *"Potter is still alive and you must tell me why."*

*"My … my powers do not work like that! Please! Let me have my crystal ball and I can show you -"*

*"Crucio!"*

*"AHHHHH!"*

Daphne moved against Blaise as they were forced to watch the horrible memory of Voldemort torturing their former professor.

Trelawney's figure became very still. The flaming Bellatrix kneeled down and checked her breathing. *"She is dead, my - Ah!"*

Trelawney shot back up, her eyes becoming a solid orange as she stared blankly out in front of her.

*"Two equals have fought, the battle's been won, but the war is not over, the fight is not done … The one who was born as the seventh month dies, was damaged beyond repair and now he hides … Only one can bring him out to finish it all, an enemy turned traitor in the Hogwarts halls … Born the same year as the sixth month began, some see him as a monster, others a man … But nothing's as it seems at every turn, and before it all ends, water will burn …"*

Trelawney's figure fell back flat. Everyone watched silently as the flames began to diminish, jaws dropping between Death Eaters and prisoners alike.

Bellatrix crossed her arms. "It really could be about anyone, my Lord. I believe young Theodore was also born in -"

"Whoa!" shouted Theo, holding his hands up defensively. "I don't recall ever turning traitor in the Hogwarts halls! It's obviously talking about Draco."

"Yes, Theodore, I agree," said Voldemort. "Which is why we must find him. Alive. *He* is the one who is going to bring Harry Potter to me, so we can finish what we started all of those years ago."

"Would that be five years ago or twenty?" asked Bronson.

Voldemort's scarlet eyes suddenly narrowed. "Theodore, step forward."

Theo obeyed, his eyes falling on Bronson for the first time since he was brought into the room.

"Torture him," ordered Voldemort.

Theo did not move.

"Did you not hear me?" he hissed, turning his head towards Theo. "Torture him. *Now.*"

Theo nodded slowly. He lifted his wand and stared right into Bronson's eyes as he shouted, "*Crucio*!"

Bronson bent at the waist as the curse washed through him, but refused to fall to

his knees.

"*Stronger*," commanded Voldemort, watching Theo closely.

Theo nodded again. "*Crucio*!"

Bronson was not sure if the curse was stronger or not, but it still hurt like fucking hell, especially when he looked into Theo's cold eyes as he did it.

"Again."

"*Cruci* -"

"No! Stop it! Stop it!" shouted Daphne, running over and kicking Theo's shins.

"Daphne, don't!" shouted Blaise, running over to his wife and grabbing her bound wrists with his. "Please, just cooperate!"

"Why? He's not going to keep all three of us alive! He doesn't need us! I'd rather go out fighting than sitting here like a dead duck!"

"That is true," said Voldemort with an amused grin. "I need you," he said, looking down at Bronson. "As a little extra reassurance that your friend will do what I've asked."

Bronson sneered at him. "Quigley has *not* betrayed us!"

"Believe what you want," said Voldemort. "It does not concern me. Now, as for you two." He looked at Blaise and Daphne. "I am unsure of your worth, but I am positive I will not need both of you." His gaze moved to just Daphne. "Astoria, step forward."

Everyone's eyes began scanning the room of Death Eaters. Eventually, the crowd split and she was revealed standing near the back with Gregory Goyle. She took a deep breath and confidently stepped forward. Her father rushed out of the crowd and moved to the front.

"Astoria, do you know this girl?" asked Voldemort, pointing at Daphne with his long, bony fingers as Astoria stopped beside him.

"Yes, my Lord," she answered in a cool voice. "She is my sister, but I have not seen her in years."

"Only because you refused to answer any of my letters," said Daphne, her eyes

tearing as she stared at her sister for the first time after years of separation.

Astoria blinked. "I never received any letters." She looked over at her father.

Arron shrugged. "She's a blood traitor, Astoria. There was no need for you to be in contact with her."

"Kill her."

All life drained from Astoria's eyes as she heard these words. She turned towards the Dark Lord. "What?"

"*Kill her*," he repeated with little patience. "Kill her now, or suffer the consequences."

"I … I cannot, my -"

"Astoria, kill her!" shouted Arron. "Do not disobey the Dark Lord!"

Astoria's eyes moved back to her sister. She shook her head frantically. "No! I cannot! I … I *will not* kill my sister, my Lord!"

Voldemort scowled at her, a truly frightening look on a face so hideous. "Theodore! Come here!"

Theo walked those few steps over to the Dark Lord.

"You were close with Daphne here in school, were you not?"

Theo nodded. "Yes, my Lord. We studied together."

"You were friends?" asked Voldemort.

Theo nodded again. "Yes, we were."

The Dark Lord put a hand on his shoulder. "Then I am giving you a choice, Theodore. *You* decide which Greengrass to kill. Your friend, Daphne, or your fellow Death Eater, Astoria. The other will be spared." He paused. "For now."

Astoria whimpered as Theo stared dumbfounded between the two. Pansy was not even aware her body was edging forward until Lucius grabbed her wrist and held her still. She looked at him and he shook his head so shallowly she could barely see it, but she obeyed, knowing very well that there was nothing she could do at this point.

Theo raised his wand and pointed it between the two girls.

"No!" shouted Blaise, jumping in front of his wife.

Rodolphus stepped forward and pulled him out of the way. Dolohov helped hold him still so they could keep his eyes focused on Daphne and Astoria, wanting him to see how this played out.

"Theo, you better point that wand at me!" shouted Daphne.

Theo looked at her, his eyes blank.

"W-what?" whimpered Astoria. "No, Theo, please -"

"Kill me, Theo!" continued Daphne. "Kill me now!"

Theo's wand drifted towards Daphne.

Astoria cried harder. "No, please …"

"I am *telling* you it is all right, Theo! If you kill my sister I will never forgive you!"

"Daphne, no!" shouted Blaise, struggling to get free.

"Kill me!"

Theo's wand moved a little more towards Daphne.

"Kill me!"

Astoria was bawling, her head shaking but her voice lost.

"KILL ME!"

A jet of green light shot out of Theo's wand and hit Daphne in the heart. Her eyes locked with his, giving a silent 'thank you' before she collapsed to the floor.

"NOO!" shouted Blaise, finally breaking free and running to his wife's side. "DAPHNE, NO!"

Astoria collapsed to her knees, her hand shaking as she reached out to touch her sister. But, before she could, her father grabbed it and pulled her to her feet.

"Foolish girl!" he spat, slapping her hard before dragging her out of the room.

Blaise barely got Daphne's lifeless head cradled in his lap before he was being dragged away from her. He struggled, screaming for his wife. But then his eyes landed on Theo. His grief immediately became anger.

"I'll kill you for this, Theo! You hear me? I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU! You're dead to me!"

Bronson was grabbed and taken from the room right along with him, his gaze never leaving Theo as the wizard stared down at Daphne, his eyes just as dead as she was.

"No one leave the manor," ordered Voldemort. "We will be heading outside of the city soon so when word comes we will be able to Apparate."

"What word, my Lord?" asked Bellatrix.

Voldemort smiled. "You will know the moment it is spoken."

He exited the room and everyone else began to clear out. Pansy tried to run forward to Daphne, but Lucius kept a firm grip on her wrist and dragged her away.

Theo was left standing over her lifeless body. He blinked a few times, looked around and saw that he was alone. Then he pointed his wand, transfigured her body into a Galleon and stuffed it into his pocket.

He went over to the desk in the room, searching through it until he found a piece of parchment. After writing something, he stuck it in his pocket next to Daphne.

Theo smirked before going over and getting comfortable on the sofa. "Fucking idiots," he muttered to himself, putting his hands behind his head and patiently waiting for the Dark Lord's order to leave the city.

# Chapter 43: The Word

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"Draco … are you all right?"

Draco looked up from his daze to see Hermione staring at him. They were sitting in the training grounds, waiting for everyone to arrive so the lesson could get started. He attempted a smile and nodded, but the lie was wasted on her.

"Is your mark hurting again?" She reached out to touch his armband, but he quickly pulled it away.

"No," he said. "It actually hasn't hurt since this morning."

"Then what is it?"

Draco sighed deeply. He looked at her and shrugged. "I don't know. Something in the air just doesn't feel right. Can't you sense it?"

Hermione frowned as she took his hand in hers. "No," she answered honestly. "But your intuition is enough for me. Do you think You-Know-Who is controlling your emotions?"

"Would this be melancholy?" asked Ron from beside them. "Because, I have to tell you Malfoy, seeing you like this is a bit unsettling."

Hermione snapped her head sharply in his direction. "No one asked you, Ronald!"

"Uh oh. I can always tell I pressed the wrong buttons when she calls me '*Ronald*'."

He, Harry and Ginny all laughed. Even Draco cracked a smile.

"You might be right, Granger," he said. "I wouldn't put it past the bastard to send me a cryptic warning like this."

"Why would he want to warn you of something?" asked Harry.

"So that I'm aware there's nothing I can do to stop it," answered Draco.

"Well, you might want to perk up before the rest of the class gets here," said Ginny. "You have a long day and the last thing we need is a melancholic Malfoy."

"Is that the bloody Weasley word of the day or something?"

"Ooh, we 'ave a word of ze day?" asked Fleur as she walked over with Victoire and Charlie.

"No," Draco said sternly.

Victoire immediately ran up to him and danced around his feet until he picked her up.

"Vickie, look what I brought for you," said Hermione, bending down and picking up Crookshanks, who had been sleeping against the side of the rock.

Victoire's eyes lit up. "Kitty, kitty, kitty!" She fidgeted so Draco would put her down and moved on to Hermione, who carefully handed Crookshanks down to her.

When she ran off, chasing him, Hermione looked at Fleur and smiled. "We were hoping he would distract her so Draco could focus on a few battle tactics that aren't exactly child friendly."

"I appreciate zat," said Fleur, smiling in return.

"If you don't mind me asking," said Draco, "why aren't the two of you at one of the family bases?"

Fleur's smile faded, and she immediately became very serious. "My 'usband died trying to bring ze world back to what eet once was. Eet would be a dishonor to 'is name eef I did not fight when ze time came."

Draco nodded in respect. When it became clear that Victoire was plenty distracted, he took his place in the center of the training grounds and began his lesson. There were twice as many people this time, most having heard positive things from his first one. The rumor of his intuition about an oncoming war was also a contributing factor. It was good to know that so many people could suck up their dignity and be trained by a Death Eater. Though, many prides must have been aching.

Victoire played with Crookshanks the entire time, but the cat seemed far less

entertained. He became so desperate to escape her that he even took to hiding behind Draco for protection.

"Oh, so *now* you like me," joked Draco as he bent down to pet him. Victoire ran over and tried to pounce on the cat again, but Draco caught her midair. "Play nice with Crookshanks, Vickie." He held her on his knee and showed her how to pet the cat properly. "Why don't you take him over to the snack table and grab him something to eat?" he suggested. "But don't let Granger see. She doesn't like it when you feed him people food."

Victoire beamed at him. She jumped off of his knee and went running off. "Come on, Cwookshacks!"

Crookshanks looked up at Draco.

"Go on."

The cat let out a low growl before slowly walking after Victoire.

When Draco looked back over at everyone taking his lesson, the majority of them were watching him, especially the women, who all had googly eyes. While Hermione seemed to find the exchange between him and Victoire just as adorable as the others, it was obvious that she did not like the way they were all looking at him. Draco chuckled at her obvious jealousy. It was nice to be on the other end again.

Once the regular lesson was over, there was a twenty minute break before the advanced one began.

"I still can't believe you let bloody McLaggen into your lesson," said Ernie as he practiced the spells Draco had just taught them with Padma.

"Forget McLaggen!" said Ron. "He let in Lucy! *Lucy*! The crazy bitch who seems to be around every bloody corner I turn lately!"

"That is true," said Ginny. "I swear that girl has a tracker on you or something."

"Or you're just fucking predictable," said Draco with a smirk.

Ginny sniggered. "Why *did* you let Lucy in, Malfoy?" she asked.

Draco shrugged. "She was one of the best at nonverbal magic, and no one can deny she's a fighter. Maybe she's not in it for the right reasons, but at least she's in it. If she's sent to the front lines then she'll go, just like McLaggen, because she

feels she has something to prove."

"But they're reckless," argued Ginny.

"So is Weasel," retorted Draco.

Ron stared daggers at him.

Draco smirked. "I didn't say that was bad. In fact, sometimes reckless behavior pays in the end. Just don't let it get you fucking killed."

"Well, if Lucy's around I'm going to need to find a bloody partner now," said Ron, looking around. His eyes stopped on Harry. "What do you say, mate?"

"Sorry," said Harry. "I'm with Ginny."

Ginny beamed and took his hand.

Ron grunted. He looked hopefully at Hermione.

"I'm Draco's assistant this time," she said.

He looked around again. It was obvious that Ernie and Padma were partners. Dean was with Seamus, Terry was with Michael, and Luna was with Katie.

"Bloody hell."

Suddenly, Susan walked into the training grounds, picking at a piece of bread. Ron jumped in front of her with such enthusiasm she almost fell backwards.

"Be my partner!" he shouted.

"Merlin, Ron, way to give me a heart attack!" she exclaimed while clutching at her chest.

Ron continued to look at her desperately.

Susan huffed. "Fine. I suppose someone has to protect you from the twat Malfoy let in."

That morning, over one-hundred people had tried out for Draco's advanced lesson, and he had only ended up letting in less than thirty. Considering, this was the base where resistance members who wanted to fight were stationed, Draco could not believe how ill prepared they all were. Nonverbal magic was essential in a war, especially for those who wanted to fight on the front lines.

Once everyone arrived, including McGonagall and Kingsley, the lesson began. Unfortunately, Hannah was not given the chance to find a partner and ended up getting snagged by Cormac, who was also avoiding Lucy. None of his lackeys had made the cut.

While many of the 'students' - for lack of a better word - expressed an interest in learning dark magic, Draco made it very clear that he would not be teaching them any such spells. There was plenty of incredible and effective magic out there that did not require the Dark Arts, and *that* would be his focus.

He began by teaching them a spell he had created a year previously but had never had the chance to use in battle. It was used most effectively by a large group. The spell required everyone to make a magical arrow and shoot it similarly to how a centaur would, only there were several curses that could be placed on the tip, doing more than just piercing its target. It required many steps to learn. Making the arrow, choosing and planting a proper curse, and shooting it effectively. They transfigured several magical targets and everyone practiced just creating and shooting their arrows for a while. It was not an easy spell and Draco knew it would take more than one lesson to perfect, but he had chosen his 'students' well and the majority of them had no trouble hitting the bullseye.

Once that lesson was finished, Draco moved on to actual spells Death Eaters used. He knew this was why most of these people were here, wanting to learn spells that had been used against them. The first one he taught was a favorite of Bellatrix, aside from the Killing Curse. It slowed the target's movements, so she had time to do basically whatever she wanted to them.

"What about that spell of hers that removes limbs? Why aren't we learning that one?" asked Lucy as Draco went around helping people.

"Well, *Lucy*, this may shock you to find out, but a spell that, basically, vanishes a person's leg or arm from existence is actually very dark magic."

Lucy huffed. "But the three Unforgiveable Curses are dark magic and we all know those."

"True," said Draco. "But the Imperius Curse could really only be considered dark if you use it with cruel intentions, the Cruciatus Curse should never be used by the so-called 'side of good'." He glanced over at Cormac and sneered at him. "And the Killing Curse … well, if you insist on killing someone, it is actually one of the more humane ways to do it. If you were going to die, would you rather have your heart simply stop beating, or be blown into a million pieces?"

Lucy bit her cheek and turned away from him.

"Besides, what good could possibly come from removing someone's limbs?" he continued. "We don't need to keep Death Eaters alive. This is a war. Aim to kill."

"Fine," she said, lifting her wand and returning to practicing the Slowing Spell with her partner.

When Draco turned back to Hermione, he noticed her staring blankly at the ground.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he approached her.

"Nothing," she answered, lifting her eyes to look at him. "I was just remembering the first time you said that to me."

"Said what?"

Hermione took a deep breath and repeated, "Aim to kill. You said that to me during the Battle of Hogwarts, after I spared Pius Thicknesse. It probably would have been better for him if I did kill him. Nearly five years under the Imperius Curse … If he ever has it removed I can only imagine how damaging it has been to his psyche."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," said Draco, taking her hand in his. "There are always exceptions, Granger. I didn't realize it back then, but there are. You did the right thing." He paused. "But, if you happen to come across someone who is Imperiused again, after you stun them, either remove the curse or retrieve their wand. Until their mind is back in order, anyone Imperiused is still our enemy."

Hermione nodded. She started to lean in to kiss him, but was interrupted by several sets of rapid footsteps. They both turned to see Andromeda run into the training grounds, Teddy held in her arms as she collapsed to her knees. Dennis and Neville were just behind her, doing the same.

"Andromeda!" shouted Draco, running over to her.

"Dwaco!" Teddy left his grandmother's arms and ran over to him. Draco met the child halfway, bending down and catching Teddy as he leapt into his arms.

"What's going on?" he asked, carrying Teddy back over to his aunt and kneeling down beside her. "What's happened?"

Andromeda was trying hard to catch her breath. Dennis had collapsed onto his

back and Neville did not look much better. Padma and Ginny ran over, and immediately started casting Healing Spells on them. Hannah ran inside to grab some potions.

"Get them some water!" ordered Kingsley to whoever was listening. Almost everyone started running over with their thermoses.

After Andromeda took a large sip, she finally managed to say, "They … found us. Had to …" She gulped … "run. They were … right there. No time." She shook her head and gulped again. "No time to prepare."

"Did they follow you here?" asked Kingsley, kneeling down beside Draco and looking at her.

Andromeda shook her head and took another sip of water.

"We got out of London fine," said Neville, seeming to be doing the best out of the three. "But Snatchers and Dementors are bloody everywhere. We kept Apparating to avoid them and got separated from -"

Just then, Kennil stepped out of the snow and into the shielded clearing. He immediately collapsed.

"Where are the others?" asked Andromeda.

Kennil shrugged. Padma moved from Dennis to him and immediately began healing while Ernie handed him a thermos of water.

"Separated … mountains," was all he was able to say.

Hermione collapsed beside Draco. He removed one arm from Teddy and took her hand in his, giving it a squeeze. She was terrified and, while he tried hard to put on a brave face for her, so was he.

Finally, Cho and Oliver ran into the clearing holding hands. They both collapsed, tears visible in Cho's eyes. Draco let out a breath of relief.

"Where's Quigley?" asked Neville.

Draco immediately tensed up again, unsure if he or Hermione was the one tightening their grip. "Quigley?"

"We lost him," answered Cho, finally letting her tears fall.

"He was right there," Oliver said quickly before gathering up more breath. "And then he wasn't. We tried to look but Snatchers were on the move."

"Why is Quigley with you?" asked Hermione, her grip on Draco only becoming tighter. "Where's Bronson?"

Andromeda and the others all began to look at each other, all of their eyes gloomy and Cho trying hard to choke back her tears.

"They came to warn us," said Andromeda, turning back, and looking at Draco and Hermione. "I don't know how they knew the attack was coming, but we only had minutes to get out. Bronson he …" She stopped and took a deep breath. "He sacrificed himself so we would have more time to escape."

"But he could still be alive!" shouted Neville. "So could Blaise and Daphne! We didn't see any of them die!"

Draco's eyes widened. "*What*? Blaise and Daphne -"

"Also sacrificed themselves," said Andromeda. "Instead of following after us when the Death Eaters appeared, they sealed the door so we couldn't be followed."

"Well … fucking shit!" shouted Draco, completely forgetting that he was holding a four-year-old. He took several deep breaths before looking at Hermione. "I'm going out to find Quigley."

He tried to hand Teddy off to her, but the child whimpered into Draco's shoulder and wrapped his little arms tighter around his neck.

Hermione looked at Teddy and sighed. "No, Draco. You're needed here. I'll go." She began to stand, but Draco pulled her back down.

"Like hell you will!"

"But you're occupied and I'm the only one who knows what he looks like."

"So?"

"Draco, he can't get in here on his own. He's never been here before. You *know* that," said Hermione. "Someone needs to find him and bring him in."

Draco was at a loss for a moment, but then he noticed Hannah running over to them with several potions in her hands.

"Abbott!" he called. Hannah veered for him. "Go into my head and pull out an image of Zander Quigley. Better yet, go into Chang's or Wood's head. They've seen him most recently."

Hannah nodded. She handed the potions off to Padma and went over to Oliver. "*Legilimens*!" She quickly found an image of Quigley and pulled it from his head, displaying it for everyone to see. "Is this him?" she asked, looking at Draco.

"Yes," he said, giving her a nod of approval. He looked back at Hermione. "Now you're not the only one who knows what he looks like."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I'm still going, Draco." She stood up.

"Then I'll come -"

Teddy's arms tightened still as he cried into Draco. Andromeda tried to grab him back, but the child was not budging.

"You need to stay," said Hermione, bending down and rubbing his cheek. "I'll be right back. I promise." She kissed him and stood up straight again. "Ron, Ginny, Ernie, Terry, get a good look at that image! You're coming out there with me!" she ordered. And then her eyes stopped on Cormac. "You too, McLaggen. You like killing Snatchers. Now's your chance."

Cormac actually smiled in response.

"Where did you last see him?" Hermione asked Cho and Oliver.

"About half a kilometer east," answered Cho.

Hermione nodded. She took one last look at Draco, smiled and blew him a kiss before running out of the safety of the shields with the others.

Draco watched her go with a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. Someone sat down beside him and he looked over to see that it was Harry. "She'll be fine," he said, reaching over and stroking Teddy's back.

Draco nodded in response. He truly hoped Harry was right.

Hermione moved through the forest at lightning speed. She wanted to get to Quigley's approximate location as quickly as possible, even though there was a good chance he was somewhere completely different by now. Everyone stayed with her for a while, but they all started to branch off in different directions the farther they went from the base. It was not long before she was alone, moving

against trees to try and avoid the Snatchers that were supposedly roaming the forest. But she never ran across any.

Deciding to take a chance, Hermione cast her spell to search for any living beings. This, of course, was a longshot, considering she was in a forest abundant with animals, centaurs, giant spiders, unicorns and Merlin knew what else, but she had to try.

The spell found something within moments. Hermione looked to her left. When she did not see anything, she slowly began to walk towards a thick layer of brush, made even thicker by the snowfall. She moved some of it aside and could just make out someone sitting on a rock. Their back was to her and they had their hood up, so she picked up a rock and tossed it against a tree. The person's head turned towards the noise, their hood falling slightly back, and now revealing the frightened face of Quigley.

Hermione sighed in relief. She went around the brush and through the trees, stopping a few feet from him.

"Granger?" he said, his face going pale as he looked at her.

"What did you get me for Christmas?" she asked.

Quigley blinked. It was a few moments before he said, "A scarf and some chocolate. But I'm the one who knew where the record shop was and I take partial credit."

Hermione cracked a smile. She ran forward and threw herself into Quigley's arms. His body was shaking as he held onto her.

"Thank Merlin you're safe," she said, crying into his shoulder.

"Granger … what are you doing out here?" he asked in a voice as shaky as the rest of him.

"Looking for you," she answered.

"Where's Malfoy?"

"At the base. Teddy did not want to let him go."

Quigley's grip on her tightened, his hands clinging desperately onto her jumper. "It wasn't supposed to be you," he said with a whimper.

Hermione pulled away and looked at him. "What?"

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Back at the base, Draco had managed to stand up while still holding Teddy. He was watching the spot where Hermione had gone out, impatiently waiting for her to return.

When someone began pacing to his right, he turned and noticed Hannah looking strangely between Oliver and the image of Quigley she had extracted.

"Something wrong, Abbott?" he asked.

Hannah jolted to a stop and looked at him. "No, it's just …" She paused and looked at Oliver again. "It's weird. When I was looking through his head just now. I know I was focused on one name, but you'd think I would have at least seen a Snatcher since there were apparently so many chasing them."

Draco blinked. "You didn't see any Snatchers chasing them?"

Hannah shook her head. "Not one."

He pursed his eyebrows and stared at Oliver still sitting on the ground. "Look again," he ordered.

Hannah nodded and went over to him. Oliver, who had been listening, sat up straight as she said, "*Legilimens*!" She came back out of his head not even twenty seconds later. "Something's wrong. Memories haven't been tampered with, but it just doesn't look right."

"What do you mean?" asked Draco, coming up beside her. Kingsley, McGonagall and Harry all moved closer.

"I can see them all running like something's there, but I don't see anything. *Nothing* was there."

"What?" Draco held out his wand to Oliver's forehead and said, "*Legilimens*!" Kingsley did the same to Cho and McGonagall did it to Andromeda.

Draco watched them all running frantically in Oliver's head, Apparating from place to place, trying to escape something that was not there. He watched until it was just Oliver, Cho and Quigley in the forest, Oliver and Cho running off in a panic and Quigley … just stopping. His eyes were still on them as he slowly backed into the trees, and ran in the other direction.

Draco pulled back out of Oliver's mind, his breath caught somewhere between his throat and his lungs. "It's a trap."

"What?" asked Kingsley, coming out of Cho's head.

"It's a trap! It's a trap! It's a *BLOODY TRAP*!"

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Out in the forest, Hermione was trying to look Quigley in the eye, but he kept avoiding her. Something rustled near them and she turned towards it in a panic. A squirrel ran by. Hermione let out a breath of relief.

"We should get out of here," she said, turning back to Quigley. "Before the Snatchers find us." She tried to move but he held her in place.

"It's fine," he said. "The Snatchers aren't here."

With a little effort, Hermione successfully pulled away and took a step back. "Then where are they?"

Quigley shrugged, his hands fidgeting with the edges of his cloak while he looked everywhere but at her. Hermione eyed the cloak curiously, suddenly feeling something that her happiness to see him had hidden from her before.

"That cloak … it reeks of magic." She gulped. "Where did you get it?"

Quigley looked down at it. "Someone gave it to me," he said. "I think he cast a spell on me so I would grab it. I wouldn't have done it otherwise."

"What does it do?" she asked.

"Makes people around me confused, I think. My guess is it was triggered by Apparition."

Hermione hurried forward and tore the thing off of him. "I'll get you a new one," she said, grabbing his hand. "Come on."

She tried to pull him, but Quigley resisted.

"Quigley, you're scaring me!" she shouted. "If they really have Bronson then we need to get back to Draco, and we *need* to come up with a plan!"

Quigley shook his head frantically. "No! No, that won't work!"

"Quigley, *let's go*!"

"It wasn't supposed to be you!" he repeated with another whimper. "It was Malfoy! Malfoy was supposed to come for me!"

"Quigley, please," she cried. "Your mind is confused. We need to get back to -"

"I'm sorry, Hermione!"

Hermione's breath caught in her throat. Her eyes widened as Quigley's hand slowly slipped away from hers. The wind picked up as the air around her shifted, a horrible chill running through her.

"Quigley … why?" she asked in an almost whisper.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, finally bringing his eyes to meet hers. "But You-Know-Who found out about Fiona. I … I wasn't going to do it."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief, tears stinging behind her eyes as several '*Pops*' sounded around her. She tried to Apparate away, only then realizing that Quigley had them standing right on the line of the anti-Apparition shield, and she was on the wrong side.

"It's the Mudblood!" someone shouted.

"I wasn't going to do it, Hermione!" said Quigley, taking a step towards her. "But Bronson -"

Hermione did not wait for him to finish before blasting open the thick wall of brush and running through it.

"Get her," ordered Voldemort, stepping forward and stopping next to Quigley. His Death Eaters laughed as they ran after her.

Quigley glanced sideways just in time to see Theo slip something into a hole in a tree. Noticing his eyes on him, Theo gave him a very evident sneer before running off with the others.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Draco looked down at his arm as it began to tingle. The taboo on Hermione's name had been triggered. Of course, he had felt it before but only ever when she was with him. And, somehow, he just knew that this time was different.

"I'm sorry, Teddy," he whispered to the child before tearing his arms off of his neck and handing him crying to Andromeda. He tried to run in the direction Hermione had gone but was instantly met with a barrier.

"The fuck!" he shouted, rubbing at his bruised nose. He looked back at Harry, whose eyes widened in fear.

"It's a shield that makes it so no one can exit. Just enter," he said. "It is only triggered when …" Harry gulped. "…when Death Eaters are close."

"Multiple Death Eaters," said McGonagall. "At least five."

All life drained from Draco. "Well, take it down!" he shouted.

"It's not that simple," said Kingsley. "To take it down we would have to -"

"I don't care what the fuck you have to do! The taboo on Hermione's name has just been triggered!" Draco held up his left forearm. "They're here for me! And if they don't get *me*, I have a pretty good feeling who it is they'll go after to lure me out!"

Kingsley sighed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Malfoy, but we can't just -"

"TAKE IT DOWN!"

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Hermione sprinted through the forest, shooting curses over her shoulder but never looking back to see if she hit anyone. There was no time for that. An entire herd of Voldemort's most trusted Death Eaters was currently pursuing her, and while they were not aiming to kill, they were aiming to capture.

"RON! GINNY! HELP!" she called out desperately. While she did not want to involve them in this, she knew there was no way she was escaping this on her own.

There was a loud sound to her left and she looked over to see Cormac run into view. He watched her zoom by, taking only a second to see what was behind her before joining.

"Fucking shit!" he shouted.

Terry appeared in front of them, letting out a loud yip and turning in the direction they were headed very quickly. Suddenly, Killing Curses were being cast.

"DON'T HIT THE MUDBLOOD!" ordered a voice Hermione instantly recognized as Bellatrix's. "The Dark Lord needs her alive!"

"Where the fuck did they all come from?" shouted Cormac from beside her.

Hermione did not answer. She could not bring herself to tell someone like Cormac that one of the people she trusted most in this world had just betrayed her.

"Okay, so, Granger, *clearly* they want you!" said Terry.

"Yeah, no shit!" spat Cormac.

"Shut your fucking mouth for once and listen, McLaggen! They're not after us! So we need to stall them so she can get the fuck out of here!"

A curse shot at them and they all dodged. They were running in zigzag patterns, trying to get behind as many trees as they could, but some of the Death Eaters were still gaining on them.

"Start circling around!" shouted Bellatrix. "We'll get her from all angles!"

"You go left, McLaggen. I'll go right. And, Granger, you just fucking go."

Hermione nodded. "Be careful."

Terry and Cormac branched away from her. Now that she was alone again, she did some more maneuvering around the forest, trying to lose them through the thickest parts of it, so sheltered that it was even untouched by snow. Navigating this area was not easy, but she felt confident enough to head down the more complicated paths.

Hermione was able to get a fair enough distance away from the Death Eaters, but when her foot got caught in some moss, in a panic, she ended up falling to the ground and covering herself entirely with it while pressing her body against a log. She had barely gotten herself hidden when several sets of footsteps jumped over it and continued on their merry way.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Terry successfully stunned a few Death Eaters before climbing a tree to avoid the few who stayed behind to try and kill him. One of them chopped it down with one swipe of his wand, and Terry leapt from it to another one, shooting a Killing Curse at the ground and successfully hitting someone.

On the other side, Cormac was taking a more direct approach, shooting Killing Curses left and right, and hitting two Death Eaters with it. He laughed in triumph, but it was too soon. Someone grabbed him from behind, taking his wand and whipping him around so he was forced to look into their eyes. Theo Nott.

"Give a message to Draco for me."

Theo flicked his wand. The movement was so slight that Cormac was not sure if a spell was even cast at all, but his neck sure did tingle. Then he was tossed backwards and a green jet of light shot at him. Cormac's eye widened and he fell back, stiff as a board.

"NO!" shouted Terry from somewhere high in the trees.

Theo looked up in the general direction his voice had come from. "Forget him!" he ordered the few Death Eaters still lingering below the tree Terry had most recently been hiding in. "We are here for Draco and the Mudblood! That is it! And I know I'm not the only one who wants to avoid the Dark Lord's wrath if we don't deliver!"

Theo ran off in the direction Hermione had gone with the others just behind him. Pansy watched as Theo moved away. When he was out of view, she looked down at the person he had just killed, whimpering as she thought of Daphne.

Pansy wiped her eyes clean and sucked back the tears. She was just about to follow the others when she heard a noise behind her. She turned just in time to see Ron Weasley shout, "*Stupefy*!"

"What are you doing?" asked Terry, jumping out of the tree he was in and running over.

"Following orders," answered Ron, picking up Pansy's stunned body and tossing it over his shoulder. "Parkinson comes with us."

Terry did not question it. He looked down at Cormac and shook his head. "Shit. I mean, I hated the prick, but I didn't want him to die or anything."

Ron nodded in agreement. "Let's get them back to the base."

"Don't you want to go after Granger?" asked Terry.

"Yes!" shouted Ron. "Which is why we need to move quickly!"

Terry nodded. He levitated Cormac, and the two of them began running back towards the base.

Hermione was just about to leave the moss she was hidden in when she heard several voices headed towards her.

"I could have sworn I saw her go this way."

Hermione peeked through it and saw two figures standing with their backs to her. Luckily, one of them had long, signature red hair.

"Ginny," she whispered as she moved out of the moss.

Ginny and Ernie turned.

"Thank Merlin," said Ginny, hurrying over and helping Hermione stand. "What happened?"

"Quigley, he … he said my name. It set off the taboo," answered Hermione with tears in her eyes.

"It's okay," said Ginny, hugging her friend and stroking her back. "We're close to the base now. We're going to get you back there."

Hermione nodded.

Ginny took her hand and the three of them started walking cautiously towards the base. They did not get very far before they were forced to stop. There were voices, and they were close.

"Spread around the area! She could not have gotten far!"

Several cloaked figures dispersed, leaving only two. Bellatrix and Rodolphus.

"Remember what you promised me, husband!" she spat. "If you want to keep your Mudblood then you must dispose of Draco!"

"Well, I don't exactly see him anywhere. Do you?"

"He'll be here! Whether Imperiused or in love, she has control over him."

Rodolphus tensed as he began looking around the area. He raised his hand to his throat. "You know, I made that deal before I heard about the prophecy."

"So?"

"So … you led me to believe that the Dark Lord only wanted him back as a pride issue, but that's not it at all. He wants Potter and anyone who stops him from

achieving that goal just might see their head chopped off in front of a cheering crowd."

"And you'll be able to live with yourself? Choosing my little prick of a nephew over the filthy whore you desire?" said Bellatrix, lifting her nose high in the air.

Rodolphus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I suppose we will just have to wait until the moment I find him. *That* is when I will decide my course of action."

Rodolphus walked off. Bellatrix huffed before heading in the opposite direction.

"Don't worry," whispered Ginny. "With Death Eaters in the vicinity, Malfoy won't be able to leave the base. He'll be safe."

Hermione nodded, but horrible knots were still twisting in her stomach.

A twig cracked to their right. All of their heads whipped in the direction of the noise, just in time to see Lucius Malfoy staring at the spot Bellatrix and Rodolphus had just been. He turned, all three of them standing completely still while he stared right at them. Then he turned his head forward again and walked on, like they had not been standing there at all.

Ginny let out a breath of relief. "Come on."

She pulled Hermione forward, but they had barely gone five steps when someone else walked into their view. Rodolphus froze when he saw them, his eyes falling on Hermione and hers falling on his neck. But he did not just walk on like Lucius. His hesitation was only for a moment, and then his wand was out and aimed right for her.

Ernie leapt in front of Hermione and took a Stunning Spell.

"GO!" shouted Ginny, pushing Hermione forward and taking out her own wand.

Hermione took off running. She wanted to look back to see what happened to Ginny, but there was no time. Soon, she could hear Rodolphus running behind her, calling for others who were now coming from all directions.

She did not slow for even a moment to think about where she was going, knowing very well that each step she took just might be the difference between life and death.

Hermione screamed as someone jumped in front of her, almost making her fall backwards. Her feet skidded on the ground as she switched directions, taking a

less direct route for the base but still on course.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Hearing her scream, Ron stared off in the direction it had come from.

"I need to go!" he said, looking at Terry.

Terry nodded. He took Pansy from his shoulders, carefully holding her while still guiding a levitating Cormac with his wand.

Ron ran off, determined to get to Hermione before the Death Eaters.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Hermione's scream had not come from the direction Draco had expected, but it was close. He ran over that way, staring through the trees and trying to catch a glimpse of her. And then, finally, there she was. Running right for him.

"Come on, Granger," he said to himself, his heart beating fast as her speed picked up, her red face stained with tears as she tried so hard to get to him.

But then Draco saw the others behind her. A sea of black, Death Eater robes swarming towards her, coming up on all sides. She was surrounded.

Hermione was so close. In the final stretch. She tried to leap into the shield, but someone jumped at her, successfully latching onto her legs and knocking her onto her stomach.

Only Hermione's fingertips made it through the shield.

"No!"

Draco tried to grab them. Even though she could not see him, she could feel him there and she tried to latch on. But her fingertips were not enough and, soon, she was pulled from the shield completely.

"GRANGER!"

Hermione kicked the person off of her. She turned and used wandless magic to send them flying backwards. Someone bound her, but it was only simple ropes and she did not even need the use of her wand to remove them.

More Death Eaters were arriving and she knew there was little hope in taking them

all on. She tried to crawl towards the shield, which was right there, but some spell grabbed her foot and pulled her back again.

A few of the Death Eaters became distracted by something coming up behind them, and she took this moment to pull a knife out of someone's holster on their hip, got to her feet and held it to their throat. Rodolphus stared back at her, unmoving.

"If any of you make one more move then I will not hesitate to finish what I started!" she spat, taking Rodolphus's wand out of his hand far too easily.

"No you won't," said Bellatrix, stepping out of the crowd and motioning someone forward. Quincy appeared, holding a person out in front of him, his wand pressed right against their throat.

"Ron!" shouted Hermione, her hand easing slightly but the knife still pointed at Rodolphus's throat.

"You are free to make your move, of course," said Bellatrix, smiling wickedly at her. "But, if you do, I can assure you that Quincy will not hesitate to kill this blood traitor friend of yours."

Hermione looked at the spot where the shield was. Only two steps behind her and she knew Draco would be right there. Then she looked back at Ron, her mind instantly flooded with the memories she had shared with him so long ago. In a time when everything was different. Simple. At least in comparison. It was then that she knew the most important thing in this moment was Ron, and him finding that happiness they had once shared again. She began to lower the knife.

"Hermione, no!" Ron shouted, trying to move forward but being pulled back. "Kill the bastard! Kill him then get the hell out of here!"

Hermione looked back at the spot she knew Draco was. She sucked back the tears in her eyes and began to lower the knife again.

"Hermione, please!" Ron pleaded. "Please, don't let them take you again!"

She looked at him once more, his eyes sad and wet as he choked on his breath.

"Please … let me go."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she looked right at Ron. "No." She dropped the knife.

Ron felt like he was falling backwards even before Hermione hit him with a Stunning Spell.

"Toss him over there," she ordered, motioning with her head towards the barrier.

None of the Death Eaters moved. Hermione took a step away from them.

"There is a shield less than a foot away from me. Once I am through it, you will be unable to follow me. Either toss him over there now, or suffer your Lord's wrath for failing to obtain me."

Hermione moved a little closer to the shield. Her eyes were focused on Bellatrix, who stared her down for a moment before nodding to Quincy. He picked up Ron and tossed him hard into the shield. To them, it appeared that he had landed behind a bush. Goyle moved around to check and ended up walking in circles.

Rodolphus grabbed both of their wands out of her hand. He bound her in the way Draco had taught her before picking up his knife.

"Quincy, grab her and carry her out of here," ordered Bellatrix, walking over and tossing Hermione in his direction. She turned to her husband and harshly said under her breath, "Until you give me what I want, you will not touch her."

Draco watched them walking away from the other side of the shield, screaming, thrashing, and throwing himself against the invisible barrier.

"LET ME OUT!" he shouted, his eyes red and angry as he glared at Harry, who was removing the spell from Ron.

"We can't lower the shield," he said. "You won't be able to get out until they're gone."

"They have your friend, your *fucking friend*, Potter! AGAIN! Are you not terrified? Do you not even care that the majority of those fucking men are already planning on torturing and having their way with her? I won't let that happen!" Draco cried. "Not again!"

Ron popped up suddenly. He turned to the barrier and crawled towards it, pounding it similarly to how Draco had done. "Hermione!" he screamed as tears stung his eyes.

"You fucking bastard!"

Draco stormed towards Ron and pulled him up by his jumper.

"You were there! You were *fucking* there! How could you just let them take her?"

"Malfoy, let him go!" shouted Padma, running over and trying to pull Draco off of Ron. "This isn't helping!"

"He tried to help her!" shouted Harry, getting to his feet. "You saw he did! But there were too many of them!"

Draco threw Ron down and turned away. He did not want any of these people to see him cry.

There was suddenly a loud commotion. Draco turned back to see Ginny, Ernie and Terry run through the barrier, Terry with someone thrown over his shoulder. And just behind them …

"CORMAC!" Lucy screamed out in horror as she ran to a levitating Cormac's side. The moment she looked into his very dead eyes, she burst into tears.

"Ginny!" shouted Harry, running over to his girlfriend and taking her in his arms.

"Harry, did you just run?" she asked, but he was too busy crying to answer.

Terry slowly lowered Cormac to the ground before walking over to Ron. "So what exactly did you want me to do with this?" he asked, tossing the person over his shoulder down in front of him.

Draco's eyes widened. "Pansy?"

"Zabini said to get her," said Ron, removing the Stunning Spell he had cast on her.

Pansy immediately shot up and gasped for air. The moment she saw Ron in front of her, she slugged him with everything she had. Then she tried to make a run for it, her nose hitting hard into the barrier.

"OW! FUCK!"

"Pansy!"

Pansy turned to see Draco standing there. Her eyes began to tear as she ran over and threw her arms around him.

"You're alive!" she cried. "They didn't get you!"

"No, they got Granger," he said.

Pansy pulled away. "Well, shit! Then what am I in here for?" She looked back at Ron, who was currently getting his nose healed by Padma. She chuckled. "Sorry, Weasel. I thought you were going to kill me."

"Right, and this is what I get for following a bloody order - AH!" He screamed as Padma used a spell to snap his nose back into place.

"Order?" asked Pansy, looking back at Draco.

"Blaise," he answered. "He told us about your father and said he wanted you out."

"That fucking little -"

"Pansy …"

"Draco, I'm fine!" she snapped. "Well, I mean, I'm not, but I'm fine enough to go back and protect Granger from the inside!"

"Since when do you care about Hermione?" asked Ron, getting to his feet.

"Stop saying her name!" shouted Padma.

"Why?" said Ron. "The Death Eaters are already here! Because of me, they already know the approximate location of our base! So I'm going to call her whatever the fuck I want!"

"To answer your question, *Weasel*, I owe her," said Pansy. She then looked at Padma. "And the taboo has already been lifted. My arm's not tingling."

Pansy's eyes suddenly drifted over to a cluster of people. Neville was sitting there, looking into a mirror. She cocked her head then wandered over to him.

The moment she was gone, a weird rush ran through Draco's body. Everyone looked over at the barrier.

"The shield is down," said Padma with a gulp.

Draco took a deep breath, looked into the forest and made a dash for it.

"No!" shouted Ron, leaping onto him and tackling him to the ground.

"Get the fuck off me, Weasel!"

"You can't just bloody go after her, Malfoy! Not like this!" Ron screamed, trying hard to pin the other wizard.

"Like hell I can't!"

Draco used his wandless magic to push Ron off of him. He tried to enter the forest again, but Ernie came out of nowhere and stopped him.

"Don't be fucking thick, Malfoy! If you go now then you'll only get both of you killed!"

"I don't care!" shouted Draco, successfully pushing Ernie off of him. "I AM *NOT* LEAVING HER THERE!"

"Neither are we!" yelled Ron, jumping to his feet and charging for Draco. "You can't save her on your own, Malfoy! You need help! Let us help you!"

"I don't *need* anything! I've saved her on my own before and I'll do it again!" Draco turned to leave again.

"No!" shouted Ron. "Malfoy, please, you need to trust us!"

Draco froze. He closed his eyes as something familiar filled his head. A dream? No. A memory. Of his mother.

"*Trust in your new acquaintances. They will help you when the time comes.*"

He opened his eyes and looked longingly into the forest, finally letting the tears fall so all could see. He needed to save Hermione. But Ron was right. He could not do it on his own.

Draco turned back around. He slowly scanned the crowd until his eyes landed on Harry. "We have to finish this," he said, storming over to him. "If I help you then this can't just be about some fucking rescue mission. It's time for you to end it, once and for all."

"Draco …"

Everyone stopped moving, the air becoming icy as a cold voice echoed beside them, almost as if the Dark Lord was standing right there.

"You have until sunrise to come and retrieve your Mudblood. The moment the sun is above the horizon, she dies a slow and horrible death. I will be waiting for you at the place it all began, and the place I would like it to end."

"Hogwarts," Harry said along with the voice.

The voice vanished just as quickly as it had arrived, leaving everyone stunned. They all turned their eyes on Harry and Draco, who were looking right at each other.

"So what will it be, Potter?" Draco asked slowly. "Will you be finishing this at sunrise, or will I be going now to rescue Hermione on my own?"

Harry, who had been staring rather hardly at Draco, suddenly softened. He took in one deep breath and said, "It's time for this to end." He turned to the growing crowd of onlookers, lifted his fist and shouted, "At sunrise, we go to war!"

Everyone cheered in excitement, jumping around and eager for it all to begin. And then end. Kingsley was the only one who looked hesitant. He ran forward. "Harry, no. You're not ready."

"I am never going to be ready, Kingsley," said Harry. "I've sat around watching my friends suffer for long enough. It's time we take back what's rightfully ours. The world is not his for the taking."

"The prophecy …"

Everyone looked over at Pansy, who was watching Harry with wide, astounded eyes.

"It's coming true."

"Yes, Pansy," mocked Draco. "It has been declared that Potter *is*, in fact, the child of prophecy."

"Not that prophecy, you prick!" she said with a sneer. "The other one! The one about you!"

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Come again."

Pansy huffed. "The Dark Lord just showed it to us. Use Legilimency on me. You can see it."

Draco looked around for Hannah. When he found her, they nodded at each other. She walked over to Pansy, put her wand to her forehead and said, "*Legilimens*!" After a moment in her head, she pulled out a memory for all to see.

"The fuck …" said Draco, after watching a fiery Trelawney recite the last prophecy she would ever make.

"Draco, I have to leave!" said Pansy, going over to him. "If I'm gone any longer then they'll get suspicious."

"No, Pansy," he said.

"But you need someone on the inside!"

"I still believe that Theo -"

"Theo killed Daphne!" she shouted, her eyes suddenly becoming wet.

Draco's heart slowed. "Daphne's dead?"

"Yes," said Pansy, wiping her eyes. "And Theo barely reacted. He's gone, Draco."

Draco turned away and tried to catch his breath.

"But Blaise and Bronson are still alive! And so is Granger!" Pansy reached out and turned him back around. "Let me go back. You can contact me through this." She handed him the mirror she had confiscated from Neville. "Just say '*Cogita*' into it and I'll answer. When it burns hot that's me trying to contact you."

Draco took the mirror. He barely felt himself nod yes to her.

Pansy sighed in relief. She gave him one last hug before running out of the base. Draco watched her disappear for a while, hoping he had not just given her a death sentence.

"Fucking Merlin! Malfoy!"

Draco turned. Ernie was standing over Cormac, who was now sitting up and gasping for air while Lucy squeezed the life back out of him.

"Cormac! I'm sorry!" she cried. "Merlin, I'm sorry!"

Cormac lightly shoved her off of him, putting his hand on his chest and trying hard to catch his breath. Draco marched over to him and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Who cast that spell on you?" he demanded.

Cormac struggled a bit, but still managed to say, "N-Nott."

"Theo?"

Cormac nodded. "He … he said to give you a message."

Draco waited, but Cormac said nothing. "*Well*?"

"I don't know what it is," said Cormac with a shrug. "He didn't actually tell me anything."

Draco paused and thought for a second. "Did any part of you tingle as he said that?"

Cormac nodded again. "My neck."

Draco whipped Cormac's head around, lowered his jumper and lifted his hairline. Two numbers were tattooed on the back of his neck.

"What is it?" asked Ernie, crouching down beside him.

"Coordinates," said Draco. He sucked the tattoo into his wand and stood up straight. Without another moment's hesitation, he ran into the forest, his wand held out in front of him.

"Ron, Ernie, go with him!" ordered Harry.

They both ran after Draco, jumping over logs, tearing through branches, shuffling through snow, dodging bushes. Draco did not slow until he reached a small clearing with a rock in the center of it. He searched around, trying to find whatever it was Theo had left for him. Then he saw it. A glimmer of gold in a tree.

He went over to the small hole, pulling out a Galleon and a piece of parchment just as Ron and Ernie arrived. He unfolded the piece of parchment and read it:

*Remove the Transfiguration Spell on me.*

Draco was about to do it when Ron shouted, "Be careful!"

With a nod, Draco put the Galleon on the rock and stepped back. He reversed the Transfiguration Spell, a bright light blinding all of them until they heard a choking sound. When they could see again, the Galleon was gone, and Daphne was in its place, sliding down the rock and gasping for breath in a similar way as Cormac.

"Daphne!"

Draco ran forward, dropping to his knees and taking Daphne in his arms. It took her a moment to really look at him, her eyes suddenly widening.

"Draco. What … How … Fuck, I was dead! Theo killed me! I saw the green light!"

Draco stared at her blankly for a moment. It was not long before he was bursting into hysterical laughter.

"That fucking bastard!"

Daphne was looking at him like he was crazy. She glanced over at Ron and Ernie, who both shrugged.

"Don't you get it?"

Daphne looked back at Draco and shook her head.

"Theo! The fucking liar fooled us all!"

Daphne blinked. "You mean he remembers he turned traitor?"

Draco nodded enthusiastically before pulling Daphne into him.

"Merlin, I'm going to fucking kill him for doing that to me!" she shouted.

But Draco barely heard her. All he cared about was that his friend was not lost. And, now, they had one more person on the inside to protect Hermione until he got there.

Hope was still present. In fact, the future was looking brighter than ever.

# Chapter 44: The Night Before

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Hermione's eyes glazed over as she listened to Voldemort speak, sending Draco a message that only gave him until sunrise to save her. Merlin, she hoped he was not already on his way and actually took a moment to think about this. It was barely sunset. He had a good twelve hours before he needed to come charging in here, which she knew he would. While part of her longed for that moment, another part of her just wished he would let her go. That he would let her die. If he came back here, there was a good chance it would cost him his life and, somewhere along the way, his life became far more important to her than her own.

The moment Voldemort was finished speaking, Hermione took in her surroundings. They were in the Hogwarts Entrance Hall. Quincy was standing behind her and the other Death Eaters were scattered around. Voldemort began barking orders, sending one of the lesser Death Eater's back to London to fetch the 'other prisoners' and sending two other ones to gather the Snatchers, Werewolves and Death Eaters stationed in nearby villages, just in case Draco decided to bring more than just himself. Another worry of Hermione's.

Once they were gone and the discussion became about what to do with her, she decided it was time to stop being obedient. She lifted her bound wrists and grabbed Quincy behind her, flipping him over shoulder. She choked him on the floor while using her wandless magic to summon his wand into her hand. She removed her binds and did not stop choking him until Gordon Goyle's wand was in her face. While she did remove her hands from Quincy's throat and drop his wand, she grabbed onto Gordon's wrist, twisted it and knocked him to his knees, successfully snapping it and finding herself with a new wand to play with.

"Drop it, Mudblood."

Hermione looked at the wizard standing behind the wand that was now aimed right between her eyes. Theo looked dead serious and she knew she had to obey. She dropped Gordon's wand and stood up straight.

"Did you really think you were going to escape that way?" asked Theo.

Hermione smiled. "No," she said. "I wasn't trying to escape. I just thought it was important to let it be known that I am not going to make this easy for you."

And with that, Hermione held out her hand and summoned a random Death Eater's wand to her.

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

The wand's former owner fell back with a loud thump. Before anyone could retaliate, Hermione dropped the wand and laughed.

"Would someone please get her under control," ordered Voldemort, barely fazed as another one of his Death Eater's dropped dead.

Bellatrix stepped forward and bound her with ropes that prevented her from using magic. Then she smacked her hard across the face. Other than a twitch of her neck, Hermione held back all movement. She smirked at the woman.

"Ouch," she said mockingly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Quigley fidgeting nervously. He did not like this game she was playing, but Theo looked surprisingly amused. It was only then that she realized Pansy was nowhere to be seen.

Bellatrix aimed her wand at her. "You fucking little -"

"That is enough, Bellatrix," said Voldemort, stepping forward. "I would like to keep her in one piece until Draco arrives."

"Why, my Lord?" she asked. "It is not like we will be releasing her when he does."

"Do *not* question my orders, Bellatrix. You are my servant and I am your master. Never forget that."

Bellatrix went white. "Y-yes, my Lord. I would never -"

"Tell me, Mudblood. How many of your *comrades* do you think Draco will have with him when he arrives?"

Hermione looked Voldemort right in the eye and said, "None. Draco's worth to the resistance is far greater than mine and I would be surprised if he showed up here at all."

"And why is that?" asked Bellatrix, moving so she was beside her master.

"If you believe they will just let him walk on out of there, you have another thing coming. They need him, and while several of the resistance members might want

me there, I am not a priority."

"But Draco will want to come for you," said Bellatrix.

Hermione moved her head towards her and smiled. "Of course. I am all he ever thinks about." Her smile widened. She and Draco had still been in London when they came up with a lie to tell if either of them was ever captured. And she was more than ready to play the part.

"So you're saying he's Imperiused?"

Hermione laughed. "You tell me."

Bellatrix looked at Voldemort, who waited for her to answer. "I don't believe he is, my Lord. You know I have never trusted my nephew."

Hermione laughed harder. "Well, I don't know about you, but the Draco Malfoy I knew in school was completely selfish. Which is why I was so shocked when he found me after my escape and offered to take me in. But then he told me his story, about how his aunt - not you, of course, the other one - Imperiused him *years* ago. He'd been feeding the resistance information ever since and getting other Death Eaters prosecuted for it. I know he is Imperiused and everything, but I can't help but believe that he actually found joy in this."

Bellatrix looked at Hermione blankly, which only made her smile more.

"He's tried to get you killed a number of times, you know? But, for some reason, Killing Curses always seem to fly right by you. Why is that, Bellatrix?"

Bellatrix's brow furrowed. "Do not speak to me so casually, you filthy -"

"And just what power do you hold over him, Mudblood?" asked Voldemort, his gaze as cold and still as ever.

Hermione's smile dropped as she turned to look at him, meeting his snake-like eyes with her amber ones. "*All* power. Andromeda gave him to me to do as I pleased and, even after we returned to the resistance, I have not relinquished any of that power. He is mine, and he will gladly kill every last one of you to make sure I am protected."

"He is yours?" said the Dark Lord.

The corners of Hermione's mouth twitched upward as her eyes narrowed. "That's right. Body and soul. Draco belongs to me."

If Voldemort had eyebrows, she was sure they would have just risen.

"Body?" repeated Bellatrix. "Are you claiming you took advantage of my Imperiused nephew?" She could not hide to amusement in her voice.

"No," said Hermione. "I simply took what is rightfully mine."

Bellatrix cocked an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"For over four years, the people in this room did whatever they wanted to me, and, now, I've done the same! Draco is my puppet in the same way all of you tried to make me yours! He does what I want and he *fucking* enjoys it!"

"Stop lying, Mudblood!" shouted Bellatrix, grabbing Hermione's face and trying to look for the scared girl in her eyes.

Hermione spit at her. "Don't touch me, you vile bitch!"

Bellatrix recoiled from her, wiping at her face like she had just been contaminated with something. "How dare you!"

She pulled her hand back and got ready to strike her, but was interrupted by the sound of someone chuckling. She looked around for the culprit.

"Is something funny?"

The crowd pulled apart to reveal Pansy standing in the back of it. She was a bit red in the face but no one paid it much mind. Hermione suddenly found herself feeling relieved.

"I'm sorry," said Pansy, trying to hold back her chuckles. "Carry on."

Bellatrix was about to try and slap Hermione again when Pansy burst out laughing once more.

"What *is* it?" she snapped.

"It's nothing," said Pansy. "Just … I mean, she's basically just said that she's been raping Draco for the last few months. *Dra-co.* Our resident man whore. The idea of anyone taking advantage of him, Mudblood or not, is … well, it's pretty funny."

"I didn't take advantage of anyone!" spat Hermione. "All I did was take what was rightfully mine! I turned my Death Eater into a slave! Just a filthy whore like you all tried to make me into, and he gladly fulfilled his obligations!"

Pansy laughed harder. This time, Theo and Goyle joined in. Even Astoria chuckled slightly, but she tried to suck it back when her father gave her a stern look.

"Call it what you want, but I have never enjoyed myself more than when I was choking the life out of him while I fucked him!"

Even more Death Eaters joined in the laughter. Rodolphus was not one of them. He had heard Draco and Hermione during a moment of passion, and there was nothing forced about it. She was lying, but his pride kept him from calling her on it. He would never admit to his wife what he had heard. He would rather die.

"What's the matter, Parkinson? Afraid to admit that he just might prefer the company of a Mudblood to a whore like you?"

Suddenly, Pansy stopped laughing. She marched forward, held up her hand and swung it at Hermione with all of her might, hitting her so hard that she fell to the floor.

"You know nothing, Mudblood!"

"I know how bored he sounded when I overheard him shagging you!" shouted Hermione, getting back to her feet. "So I had him dispose of you! And he was more than happy to do it! He did not even try to fight me on it like some of the other tasks I gave him, you filthy, twisted -"

"Enough!" shouted Voldemort.

Hermione whipped her head back towards him and narrowed her eyes.

"I will not say that I believe you," he said in his raspy voice. "But, I suppose, we shall see when Draco arrives." He looked at Pansy. "Take her to the dungeons. Lock her up and stay with her until I give further instructions."

Pansy smirked. "Gladly, my Lord." She grabbed Hermione's arm and began dragging her.

"But, my Lord," said Quincy. "Should the Mudblood not be punished properly for her misdeeds?" He looked at Hermione and licked his lips. She grimaced.

"I have already made it very clear that no one is to touch her until Draco is back in our clutches. He is to find her in one piece." Voldemort stopped and smiled. "Then we tear her apart."

Quincy and Macnair exchanged a smirk, making Rodolphus's blood boil. If Bellatrix had not grabbed his wrist, he would not have hesitated to curse them right there.

"That is, unless Lucius would like another chance with her," said Voldemort, turning his head and looking at the wizard standing close by. "After all, it only seems fitting. You took her and she took your son. It would be a great way to restore the Malfoys status. By regaining power over her."

Lucius looked at Hermione for a moment, seeming to be contemplating what the Dark Lord had suggested. But, in the end, he shook his head and said, "I have no interest in sharing her with my son. If anyone should decide her fate, it is Draco. Once it has been proven that he is, in fact, Imperiused, she should be given to him."

Voldemort smiled. "We shall see."

He looked back at Pansy and nodded her forward. She dragged Hermione away, kicking and screaming as she pulled her down to the dungeons, a few students poking their heads out of the Slytherin dormitories as they went by.

Pansy did not stop until they had gone down several staircases, eventually walking into a small prison. She opened one of the cells, tossed Hermione in and walked in after her.

Pansy crossed her arms and said, "Well played. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were batshit crazy."

Hermione smiled.

"Bronson said something similar. Did you have it planned?"

"Of course we did."

Pansy was just about to take her wand to heal Hermione's face when she heard approaching footsteps. She turned just in time to see Bellatrix step off of the stairs and head straight into the cell.

Pulling out her wand, Bellatrix aimed it at Hermione and shouted, "*Crucio*!"

"What are you doing?" yelled Pansy. "The Dark Lord said not to touch her!"

"No one spits on me and gets away with out!" hissed Bellatrix. She grabbed Hermione by the hair and lifted her so their eyes were level. "Enjoy your time down here, you filthy liar! Soon, my precious nephew will be dead, and you'll be wishing

you were while my husband has his way with you night after night. You will *never* know freedom or happiness again. *Crucio*!"

Bellatrix walked out of the cell while Hermione was hit with one of the most powerful Cruciatus Curse's she had ever felt. As she writhed on the floor, her ring on its chain fell out of her jumper. Pansy kneeled down when she saw it, gazing blankly for a moment before her eyes began to tear. She tore it off of Hermione's neck and put it in her pocket.

"Best not to let Bellatrix see that," she said before casting a small Healing Spell on her.

Pansy stepped out of the cell and locked the door behind her. She went over and sat against the wall.

Hermione pushed herself back up and moved against her own wall. It was obvious that Pansy was upset but she was not exactly sure what to do to comfort her, or even if she should. Until recently, Pansy had always been someone horrible to her. An enemy. But, in all of these years, she had never once stopped loving Draco. And, while Pansy knew he was in love with someone else, sometimes it never seemed real until an engagement ring was involved.

XXX

Draco was alone in the room he and Hermione shared, with no one but the damn cat for company. He went through Hermione's bag, searching for anything that might be useful. He stuffed a few potions in his pockets, but most of her things would have to be left behind.

Draco backed up until his legs hit the bed. He sat down and rubbed the comforter. It had been less than twenty-four hours since he had made love to Hermione on this bed, not realizing that it may have been the last time they would ever get the chance.

His eyes began to tear as his fingers clutched the comforter. Draco cried as he pictured her face, suddenly realizing that he had no recent photos of her to look at, to hold onto, to help him get through this. Someone could be having their way with her right now and he was still here, preparing. Doing *nothing*.

Draco brought his hands up to his face as he cried harder. He had let this happen. He had let her go looking for Quigley when he knew something was wrong. He had felt it. For days, he knew the Dark Lord was planning something, but he had never for one second believed that Quigley would ever betray them. If anything,

Draco had sometimes felt that maybe Quigley had a bit of a crush on Hermione. Not one that he would ever act on, but it was certainly there.

Suddenly, Draco felt something soft rub against him. He removed his hands to see Crookshanks looking up at him. He meowed and licked Draco's arm.

Draco laughed. "What? So you like me now?"

The cat gave him a look that could only be perceived as serious. Draco smiled and rubbed his head.

"I am going to get her back," he said. "You may never see me again, so I'm going to need you to comfort her. Help her forget all about me and move on."

Crookshanks meowed and stepped onto Draco's lap. He put his two front paws on his shoulders and licked his face, purring loudly as he did this.

There was a knock on the door and they both looked over at it.

"Malfoy, it's Harry. Can I come in?"

Crookshanks stepped down and made himself comfortable next to Draco. "Come on in, Potter."

The door opened and Harry stepped inside. "The resistance members from the other bases have arrived. Luna is about to take them up the mountain. Terry should have warned Slughorn by now so, hopefully, we'll be able to get the students out quickly."

Draco nodded.

"Andromeda is prepared to cast the Imperius Curse whenever you are ready."

He nodded again.

"Malfoy, she … she's going to be all right," said Harry. "She has to -"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence, Potter," spat Draco, wiping at his eyes. "I was really hoping you were done being naïve. The Dark Lord may be lenient until I arrive, and Theo and Pansy will do what they can to help her, but Hermione will not be untouched. They *will* hurt her. We can be sure of that."

Harry whimpered and looked down at the floor. "Why, Malfoy?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Draco looked over at him. "Why what?"

"Why do you care about her so much?"

Draco took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "This may shock you, Potter, but when Hermione came into my life, I was not all right. There were one too many deaths by my hand and I was ready to give up. I wanted it to end," he said, finally opening his eyes. "After I warned Andromeda about the curfew, I went outside to a curb and waited for the Knight Bus. In front of me was the river, only a few yards away. It would have been so easy to just jump in and never emerge. I wanted to do it. I was going to do it. But then, before my feet could move, a girl cried out beside me, and, suddenly, my entire life changed.

"Maybe it all began because Granger needed me to help her forget about everything that happened to her, but I needed her just as much. She is my redemption. My chance to be forgiven for everything I have done, and I love her. I love her giving me that, for being there when I needed her, for just … *being* her. I love all of her. She has saved me just as much as I have saved her. Her strength is what keeps me going. I won't let her die, Potter. If I'm unable to get her out then you need to do it. You can't leave her again! You can't -"

"I won't!" said Harry, finally bringing his eyes up to meet Draco's. "I will *never* leave her again. Ron and I will get her out or we'll die trying."

Draco nodded.

"We'll get you out too, Malfoy. Hermione needs you. She loves you. And she deserves her happiness. Both of you do."

Draco smiled softly. "I've been watching you during my lessons, Potter. That wand you have, it's not a very good match for you, is it?"

Harry sighed. "I'm lucky to have a wand at all, so I can't really complain."

"Of course you can. The child of fucking prophecy has every right to complain."

"I'm not the only child of prophecy anymore, now, am I?" said Harry with a smile.

Draco stood up and walked towards him. "No. But my prophecy is only an extension of yours." He reached into his pocket, "It is up to you to defeat the Dark Lord, so Hermione can have her happy ending," and pulled out a wand. But not just any wand. The Hawthorn wand. "My mother took this back for me. I remember it worked well for you."

Draco slipped the wand into Harry's hand. Harry looked down at it, his eyes unblinking.

"Uhh … what …?"

"Kill the bastard, Potter."

"But … what about you?" asked Harry.

"My other wand works just fine for me," answered Draco. "Just don't use it yet. The trace on it is still in effect, but once you're there, staring the Dark Lord in the eye, it will hardly matter."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, Malfoy."

Draco had a hard time letting go of his wand, but he still did it, knowing very well that this was necessary. He had to let his wand go, along with the connection he felt with his mother. She was his past, and Hermione was his future. He would protect her at all costs, even if it meant giving something so precious to Harry Potter. It was just a piece of wood. Hermione was his light. His life.

There was a knock and they both looked over to see Daphne standing in the doorway with Ron just behind her. "Sorry to interrupt, but I thought it was time we contacted Pansy," she said. "She needs to know the plan, and *I* need to know what's happening with my husband."

Draco nodded. He took the mirror out of his pocket and said, "*Cogita.*"

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Pansy had not even realized she had spaced out until her pocket began to burn. She blinked a few times to snap back to reality, then looked over at Hermione. She was sitting with her back against the wall, her eyes focused on the floor as she undoubtedly thought of Draco. Her wrists were still bound, but the ropes looked a bit tattered, like she had been trying to get them off.

Pansy was just about to reach into her pocket and take out the mirror when she heard several sets of footsteps headed down the stairs. She stood up and so did Hermione, both watching as Bellatrix and Rodolphus walked down with several Death Eaters behind them, and they were dragging prisoners. Bellatrix and Rodolphus began opening cells. Fiona was thrown into the cell on one side of Hermione and Bronson was thrown into the cell on the other. Blaise was beside him and Stuart was given the cell in the far back corner.

"What is my father doing here?" asked Pansy, watching Stuart closely as he began walking in a small circle while keeping his eyes focused on the same spot on the floor.

"It seems that when the Dark Lord ordered these buffoons to bring the prisoners," said Bellatrix, "his lack of the word 'relevant' meant they should bring them all!"

She smacked one of them fiercely before heading back up the stairs.

Fiona took one look at Hermione from her cell. Her eyes flared and she lunged for her, reaching through the bars and trying hard to attack. Her cell had not been locked yet and Rodolphus stepped in, pulling her back by the hair.

"Play nicely, *slave*." He tossed her hard against the bars before exiting the cell and locking it. "Come along, Parkinson. The Dark Lord has passed your task on to these idiots, who will be guarding the door upstairs."

Pansy did not take her eyes off of her father.

Rodolphus grabbed her shoulder and dragged her up the stairs. "Forget about him. He is already lost."

Rodolphus glanced back at Hermione one final time with lust-filled eyes. She sneered at him. Once the other Death Eaters were gone, most likely taking their position at the top of the stairs, Hermione and Bronson ran for each other. He untied the ropes around her wrists, then they reached their arms through the bars and gave the best hug they could manage.

"Cupcake! Thank Merlin you're all right!" Bronson cried as he held her. He was so happy to see her down here, untouched by any Death Eater hands. "How long have you been here?"

"I don't know," she said. "A few hours."

"Stop hugging the whore, Bronson," said Fiona, sitting down against the wall. "I'd say it's contagious, but you're already one so it hardly matters."

"Will you shut the fuck up!" shouted Blaise, hitting the bars around his cell. "There are more important matters at hand then you getting dumped for a man! My wife is fucking dead!"

Hermione's breath caught in her throat. She gulped. "Daphne's dead?"

Bronson nodded, but he did not stop squeezing her against the bars. "Theo did it."

Hermione gasped.

"And I am going to *fucking* kill him for it!" cried Blaise as he sunk to the floor.

"You can't!" shouted Bronson. "He had to make a choice and he followed your wife's wishes!"

"He tortured you!" spat Blaise.

"He had to -"

"Stop making excuses for him! I don't care if he fucking helped you before! Theo's flipped his switch! He's our enemy now and it's time you accept it!"

Bronson said nothing. He pulled slightly away from Hermione, but kept his hands on her arms as he looked into her eyes.

"Cupcake -"

"We're already locked up, Bronson, you can call me by my name now."

Bronson attempted to smile. "But I like cupcake." His smile quickly faded. "How …" He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "How did they capture you?"

Hermione went white. She looked away from him as she said, "The taboo. My name was said and I was unable to escape."

"But … who said -?"

"Stop beating around the bloody bush, Bronson!" shouted Fiona. "He wants to know if *my* brother betrayed you!"

Hermione sighed. "She's just as pleasant as I remember."

Bronson continued to look at her hopefully.

A tear slid down Hermione's cheek. "Yes, Bronson. Quigley is the one who set off the taboo."

Bronson's fingers began to dig into Hermione's arms. Tears spilled out of his eyes as he finally realized the horrible truth. They had all been betrayed by the person he loved most in this world. His oldest friend. The only family he had ever really known.

"I'm sorry."

Hermione rubbed his back. "It's not your fault. You couldn't have known -"

"But I should have known!" cried Bronson. "He came home upset the other night and I just … let it be. I thought he'd come to me if he needed me, but he … he …"

Bronson collapsed to his knees, bringing Hermione down with him. She continued to hug him through the bars, trying to sooth him as best she could while he desperately clung onto her.

"I'm sorry, Cupcake! I love you! I never wanted you to get hurt!"

"I know," said Hermione, bringing her hand up to stroke his hair. "I love you too."

"You don't deserve this! You have been through so much already, you deserve to be free!"

Hermione smiled softly. "So do you."

But, at the current moment, Hermione knew that the chance of any of them being free again was near impossible.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Pansy found an abandoned classroom and locked herself inside of it. She took out the mirror and said, "*Cogita*!"

"Took you fucking long enough!" shouted Draco.

"Sorry," she said, bringing her finger up to her lips. "I was on guard duty."

"Is Granger all right?" he asked desperately.

Pansy nodded. "Yes. The Dark Lord ordered everyone not to touch her until you arrived."

Draco sighed in relief, letting out a small whimper.

"They just brought the others here," continued Pansy. "They're all locked up in the prison just below the Slytherin Dungeons and -"

"Others? Is Blaise there, Pansy? Did they bring him?"

Pansy's heart stopped. Tears filled her eyes as the mirror suddenly moved to show Daphne. "D-Daph -"

"Way to give her a bloody heart attack!" shouted Ron, pulling the mirror away from her. "Making her think that zombies are roaming the Forbidden Forest or something."

"Sorry," said Daphne, taking the mirror back. "Pansy, I'm here! Not a zombie, just me! All right?"

Pansy nodded, the tears spilling out of her eyes as she stared at her best friend, alive and well, and with the resistance.

"Theo didn't kill me. He used some spell of Draco's that just looks like the Killing Curse. Then he transfigured me into a Galleon and left coordinates on some annoying git's neck so Draco could find me. He remembers he's on our side!"

Pansy suddenly flushed with anger. "What?"

"Do you know where he is?" asked Draco, taking the mirror back. "I want to talk to both of you."

"I can find him," said Pansy. "Give me a few minutes."

She put the mirror in her pocket, cleaned off her face and looked back into the hallway. When she saw the coast was clear, she walked out and headed in the direction of the Entrance Hall. Where she had last seen Theo.

The Entrance Hall was essentially clear now, aside from Astoria and Goyle who were sitting on a set of stairs. He was comforting her while she cried, her eye black and swollen and appearing to be hurting her while tears spilled out of it.

"Have either of you seen Theo?" asked Pansy.

Astoria grimaced as she said the name.

"He went that way," said Goyle, pointing.

Pansy looked at Astoria. Taking out her wand, she cast a Healing Spell on her eye. "Take this to one of the classrooms," she ordered. "You do not want the Dark Lord to see you like this."

Astoria nodded. Goyle helped her up and they both walked off.

Pansy went in the direction Goyle had said, eventually finding herself in the library. Theo was sitting at a table near the back with his head down. He looked up as she approached.

Pansy marched right up to him, grabbed him by the cloak and yanked him out of his chair, slamming him hard against one of the bookshelves. "You *fucking* bastard!"

Theo's eyes widened. "Pansy, what the fuck -"

"For a month, *a MONTH,* I have been trying to get you to crack! You really trust me so little?"

"What -?"

"Explain this!"

Pansy took the mirror out of her pocket and held it up to Theo. Daphne was holding it. She smiled and waved.

"Th'fuck?" said Theo, taking it from her and staring down at Daphne. Then he looked up at Pansy. "When did you go fucking traitor?"

"A hell of a long time before you did!"

"Theo!"

Theo looked back at the mirror to see Draco holding it now. "As you can see, I got your message."

"Uhuh." Theo began scanning the library. He grabbed Pansy's hand and pulled her towards one of the private study rooms, shutting the door behind them. He took out his unregistered wand and put a Silencing Charm around it.

"So you have your memory?" asked Draco, once Theo looked into the mirror again.

"You told me not to forget," he said with a smile. "It was all a bit vague at first but, when my father took me to your place, it all kind of snapped back. I think it had more to do with the torture than the spell."

Draco gulped. "Theo, I … I'm sorry I left you behi -"

"I told you to fucking go, Draco. You needed to stay with Granger," said Theo. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Look, I didn't know the Dark Lord found out about Quigley's sister. That's what he used to get him to betray you. I would have tried to get word to you sooner if I had -"

"It's fine, Theo. We're finishing this."

Theo opened his eyes. "What?"

"I'm coming for Hermione, and then we're going to war."

Theo looked down at his arm. "Did they turn off the fucking taboo already?"

"Everyone was really annoyed by it," said Pansy. "I'm sure Bellatrix had a switch ready."

"Is that more important than a fucking war?" spat Draco.

"Sorry," said Theo, looking back at him. "I assume Pansy already told you that Bronson and Blaise are -"

"Yes, we know," said Draco.

Theo's eyes suddenly glazed over. "I don't even know what Bronson was fucking doing at Andromeda's that early."

Pansy gulped. "That was me. The mirror Draco has was Bronson's before and I used it to warn him about what was happening."

Theo slowly drew his eyes over to her. "In the fucking loo?" he asked.

Pansy nodded.

"Well, ain't that a bitch."

"What did you think I was doing?" asked Pansy.

"Honestly?"

She nodded.

"All of this fucking time I thought you were plotting something with Lucius to bring Draco back and screw Granger over. I figured whatever you were doing in there had something to do with that."

Pansy's eyes widened. "What?"

"You were always spending so much fucking time with him. And then I saw you slip into his bedroom when he had that Bell girl in there. That was when I started to wonder if maybe the two of you were shagging."

Now her eyes nearly bugged out of her skull. "WHAT? Theo, that's sick!"

Draco and Daphne laughed on the other side of the mirror.

"Why? Because he's older? It's not like you don't have fucking daddy issues."

Pansy turned bright red. She swung her arm back and hit Theo hard in the face.

"Ow! Fuck!" he shouted. "Dammit, Pans!"

"She hits people a lot, doesn't she?"

"What? What the fuck was that, Weasel?" shouted Pansy, taking the mirror from Theo and staring into it. Draco tried to hand it off to Ron but he quickly pushed it away.

"If you two are finished, we have more important matters to discuss," said Draco.

"Hold on," said Theo as he healed his eye. "I want to know why fucking Pansy got Bronson involved in all of this. Why'd you even approach him?"

"I wasn't going to until I saw the two of you in the bloody alley together," she said.

Theo's jaw dropped.

Pansy smirked. "That's right. I told him to stay away from you since your father was watching you, then I bribed him into working with Daphne and Blaise with cigarettes."

"And we just want you to know, Theo, that we *all* support you in your newfound sexual preference," said Daphne, taking the mirror and smiling into it.

"What?" said Theo.

Silence all around.

"Nott's gay?" said Ron.

"I'm not fucking gay!" shouted Theo, grabbing for the mirror.

"It's all right, Theo," said Daphne. "Your friends *support* you and, well, Bronson is one hell of a man to start with." She winked.

Theo groaned. "Fucking shit …"

"More *important* matters!" said Draco, taking the mirror back.

"Pansy shouldn't be involved with your plan!" said Theo. "Not if Quigley knows -"

"He doesn't know about me!" snapped Pansy. "Bronson didn't want him any more involved than he already was, so he only ever knew about Daphne and Blaise."

Theo sighed in relief and nodded. "Sorry about the daddy issues -"

"It's fine," said Pansy. "Sorry about outing you." She smirked.

"GUYS! THE FUCKING PLAN!" spat Draco.

"Sorry!" they both said, turning towards the mirror.

Theo smirked into it. "What do you need us to do?"

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Hermione looked over at Bronson as they both sat in their cells. He was leaning against the bars near her with his eyes closed, seeming to be asleep, even though she knew he was not. She could just make out Blaise on his other side, lying spread eagle and crying as he thought of Daphne. Fiona was curled into a ball in her own cell, trying to keep warm since all she had was a simple, tattered dress and nothing more. Not even shoes.

It was close to pitch black in the dungeon, but Hermione's eyes had long ago adjusted. She wished there was a window so she could have some idea about what time it was. The fact that Draco had not come yet was a good sign. It meant he was thinking this through.

Suddenly, the door to their dungeon opened and footsteps were heard coming down the stairs. A light emitted throughout the room. Everyone opened their eyes and looked up, all visibly disappointed when Quigley stepped off of the staircase.

"What the fuck do you want?" spat Bronson as he reached into Hermione's cell and took her hand.

"I was told to come down here," he said, looking sad as he avoided everyone's eyes. "I … I'm sorry for how this all turned out."

"Yeah, I'll fucking bet." Bronson squeezed Hermione's hand tighter.

"I was going to tell you," said Quigley, finally looking at him. "I had already decided

that I was, but then You-Know-Who showed up on our bloody balcony and told me if I didn't deliver Draco or Hermione by the end of the day that he would kill you and Fiona, and lock me up. I … I was at a loss," he cried, "so I told him about Andromeda. I told him she would lead him to where he needed to go. But I didn't tell him about Blaise and Daphne! He already knew about them! I swear! Her father has been following her for years and -"

"No one wants to fucking hear your shit!" shouted Blaise, sitting up in his cell. "Because of you my wife is dead! SHE'S FUCKING DEAD!"

"I … I'm sorry."

"Sorry *really* isn't going to cut it this time, Quigs," said Bronson. "If you haven't noticed, there are more people locked in these cells then you can bargain for."

Quigley turned pale. He avoided looking at Blaise completely but glanced nervously at Hermione. "I'm sure Malfoy is going to come for you."

Hermione huffed. "Yes, Quigley, he *is* going to come for me. And do you know what's going to happen?"

Quigley did not answer.

Hermione let go of Bronson's hand and stood up, slowly edging towards the front of her cell. "They're going to kill him," she said. "Maybe not right away, but they *will* do it. They're going to kill him, they're going to kill me, they're going to kill Bronson and Blaise, and they're probably going to kill you and your fucking sister too! You *do not* make deals with the devil!"

Hermione slammed her hands up against the cell, making Quigley jump.

"You should have told us!" she spat. "You should have told us the moment You-Know-Who approached you! We would have helped you, Quigley! We would have done anything for you!"

"No you wouldn't," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Malfoy knew where Fiona was, and he sent her back there. He didn't even try to get her out!"

"Fiona didn't want to leave!" shouted Bronson, getting to his own feet. "She was safest where she was at the time and you know it! Just look at her, Quigley!" He motioned towards Fiona, who lifted her head to stare at him. "Look at your fucking sister and accept that she doesn't need you to rescue her! Until the manipulative bastard who owns her is dead, she's not going anywhere and you know it!"

"He's not manipulative!" shouted Fiona. "He loves me!"

Bronson smirked. "Point proven."

"Then I'll kill him," said Quigley. "Even after they release Fiona, I'm not going anywhere. Not without -"

"No one fucking wants you here, Quigley! Don't you get it?" shouted Bronson, his flaming eyes tearing. "You were my brother! The only family I've ever really had! And, because of you, I'm going to lose everyone that's important to me! You're already lost, and Malfoy and Hermione are going to die! I don't even care about myself anymore, but *them*! After everything they've been through, they deserve to be happy! And you've just fucking taken that away from them!"

Bronson turned away from Quigley and walked towards the back of his cell, running his hands through his hair and desperately craving a cigarette.

"Bronson … it's not over -"

"I DON'T WANT TO FUCKING TALK TO YOU ANYMORE!" Bronson sunk down against the wall. Hermione went over and sat down next to him.

The door upstairs opened and several more sets of footsteps headed down the stairs. Hermione watched in horror as Voldemort stepped off of them, looking at her coldly as she held onto Bronson's hand. Bellatrix walked up behind him, looked at them and raised her eyebrows.

"So you do enjoy female companionship. I was hoping for as much." She smirked.

"He is not yours just yet, Bellatrix," said Voldemort, looking at Quigley. "You have done well, and have rightfully earned the freedom of one of your friends." He motioned between Fiona and Bronson. "Which one shall it be?"

Quigley lifted his eyes and stared at Bronson.

"Don't fucking look at me. I'm perfectly fine staying right here."

He moved his eyes to Fiona.

She shook her head. "No."

"I want my sister," said Quigley.

Voldemort nodded. "As you wish."

He motioned to Rodolphus, who stepped forward and unlocked Fiona's cell.

"No!" she screamed as he walked towards her. She flung herself at his feet. "Master, please! Please, don't let him take me!"

"I am not your master anymore!" shouted Rodolphus, grabbing her hair and pulling her to her feet. He tossed her out of the cell and at Quigley. "Get her out of my sight!"

"Master! No! Please! I love you! I LOVE YOU!"

Fiona continued to scream. She cried and thrashed as Quigley dragged her up the stairs.

"Stop it, Fiona!" he shouted.

"NO! I hate you! I hate you! I FUCKING HATE YOU!"

"Aw, the sweet sounds of family," said Voldemort with a wicked chuckle. All of the Death Eaters present joined in. When he was finished, his eyes landed on Hermione. "And now you, Mudblood. There is only one hour until sunrise. I believe it is time we wait for Draco elsewhere."

Hermione glanced nervously at Bronson before standing up. He did not want to let go of her hand, so she used her wandless magic to send him a small shock. When he pulled away, she walked towards the cell door. Rodolphus opened it and bound her again before stepping aside.

"This is it, Mudblood," said Rodolphus, reaching out the hand he did not need to touch his throat and stroking her cheek. She recoiled. "The moment Draco walks through the doors, you become mine again. The Dark Lord has already confirmed it."

"Not forever, Rodolphus," reminded Voldemort. "Her execution *is* eminent. Never forget that."

Rodolphus looked at Bellatrix, who gave him a faint nod.

Suddenly, Hermione pulled back and bit the hand that was stroking her.

"AH!" he screamed, pulling it back and then slapping her.

Hermione barely flinched. "I told you when I slit your fucking throat open that you would never touch me again and I meant it!" she spat. "You will never have me,

Lestrange! No matter what you try to pull, I will *never* be yours!"

Rodolphus moved his hand to strike her again, but, before he could, the Dark Lord stopped him.

"That is enough, Rodolphus. She has far less control here than she thinks she does. It is time for us to go to the Great Hall."

"Yes, my Lord," said all of his Death Eaters.

Voldemort headed out of the dungeon first, followed by the others. Hermione stole one last glance back at Bronson before being forced up the steps by the Death Eaters she was sandwiched between. Rodolphus stayed in the back, stealing every moment he could to touch her, even leaning in and sniffing her hair.

Hermione tried hard to hide her fear, but she was sure she was not completely successful. Because nothing scared her more - not even death - than belonging to Rodolphus Lestrange again.

<p style="text-align:center">XXX</p>

Draco stood in the Forbidden Forest, close enough to see Hogwarts but not so close that he would trigger the patrolling Snatchers and Dementors of his arrival.

"They have called in reinforcements," he said to the invisible entity beside him.

"Yeah, I can see that," said Ron, poking his head out of Harry's invisibility cloak. "Looks like he's already suspicious that you wouldn't come alone."

Draco nodded. "You sure you're up for this?"

"Yes," said Ron. "I've been waiting for this day for years. And tell me I don't look like a badass carrying this thing." He lifted the Sword of Gryffindor, catching it's brilliant silver in the moonlight.

Draco chuckled. "Just don't stab yourself with it."

"Done." Ron put the sword back in it's holster. "Are you ready to finish this?"

Draco nodded. "I've been ready, Weasel." He looked at the other wizard and smiled. "Let's go get our girl."

Ron smiled in return. He put the cloak back over his head, and the two of them slowly began to step towards the place it all began, and would now end.

Hogwarts.

# Chapter 45: Keep Your Hands Off My Baby

**A/N: According to my calculations, there should be four more chapters after this one. But, since I have been known to get a bit wordy, let's just say four to six.**

**So I am SUPER excited about this chapter, because I have had it planned for a long, long, long, long, long, long time! Starting with Draco's entrance …**

**You *have* to listen to 'Seven Devils' by Florence + the Machine during this first part, mainly because it is the song I have always imagined playing while he heads in to save her. And, yes, I listened to it on repeat while writing it. Had to set the mood. ;oP**

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Draco stepped out of the safety of the trees of the Forbidden Forest, instantly feeling the alarm he had set off circulating through his veins. Ron had stepped through at the same moment so it would only trigger once.

"This way!" someone shouted in the distance.

Draco closed his eyes and listened to the approaching footsteps.

"Remember, Weasel. No matter how much I struggle, do *not* help me. They cannot know you're here."

"I know," Ron said quietly beside him.

Draco opened his eyes again. "Five Snatchers are headed this way." He suddenly smiled. "You know, I think I'm going to have my own fun with a sword."

Using his foot, Draco kicked a fallen twig off of the ground and into his hand. He transfigured it into a glowing, blue sword, swinging it just in time to slice an approaching Snatchers head off.

"Showoff."

The headless body collapsed. Draco marched forward, not even looking as he sent a jet of green light to his left, successfully hitting a Snatcher directly in the heart. And, this time, the victim would not be rising again after twenty minutes. He was quite dead.

A Stunning Spell shot at Draco. He easily sidestepped it. Another one. He had to

dodge this one. Two Snatchers came running up to him. Without slowing his steps, he swung his sword in a crescent shape, sending a powerful wave of light forward that sliced both Snatchers across the middle. Blood splattered in two perfect streaks across the pure-white snow. The Snatchers' faces were still conscious for a moment, looking down at their wounds before they slowly began to fall into two pieces. Top and bottom.

Their eyes were still wide open as their heads hit the ground, but Draco had no time to stop and notice.

His heart began to race. There was only one more Snatcher in close enough vicinity to reach him before he approached the castle, and he was waiting for him, his wand drawn as he blocked Draco's entrance to the courtyard.

Draco knew him. He was not afraid to share a pint with those deemed lesser than him after a successful mission, and this boy, even younger than him, had the glowing eyes of youth and pride as one of the top Death Eater's sat with him, even purchasing him a drink. But that was a good two years ago now, and his eyes no longer glowed as they once had. They were dark and cruel, shadowed behind years of heinous deeds that can do nothing but tatter a weak soul into a million irreparable pieces. The young boy was gone and in his place emerged a servant, eager to please and ready to die.

If he did not relinquish then Draco had no choice. This was a war. From here on out, there would be no prisoners. He would show no mercy.

"You sure you want to do this?" asked Draco, giving the boy one last chance to run for it.

But his wand remained pointed, his face behind it fierce.

Draco sighed as he lifted his own wand, letting the Snatcher shoot a Stunning Spell at him. He blocked it with a simple wave of his hand, simultaneously sending a Killing Curse straight at his heart.

The Snatcher fell back slowly. Draco levitated him out of his path and continued forward. He had made it quick. That was the most he could give.

Draco cast a spell, opening the gates that led into the courtyard.

He stepped inside, his eyes cautious as he scanned the open space. One. Two. Three steps. He stopped. There was a rustle. It was faint but it was definitely there.

Draco held out his hand to stop Ron. The movement was small enough so anyone watching him would pay it no mind, but he did not dare say anything. With the Silencing Charm and a spell hiding his footprints, he could only assume that Ron obeyed.

It was a pretty good assumption that the Dark Lord was watching him now, and he would not wait an hour to see if the real Draco had come. He would want to test his skills.

Draco gripped tightly onto his sword. It was strange that he had never thought to use one before, because it was damn good magic.

The rustling continued on Draco's left but, when he turned to look, something moved in the shadows to his right. Glancing around, he could tell that something was missing, but it had been so many years since he had sat in this courtyard that he was not sure what it was. But then he noticed the four podiums in each corner of the open space. They were empty.

"Shit!"

Draco dodged just as a stone eagle flew beak first at his head. He rolled in the snow and landed back on one knee, raising his sword and striking as the bird came for him again. It shattered into a million stone shards.

Draco barely had time to get back to his feet when a badger was scurrying towards him. And not just any badger. He was about four times the size of a normal one and looking pretty damn ravenous.

Lifting his wand, Draco sent a blast at it, but the badger reflected his spell like it was nothing. Draco grunted. Anti-magic shields had been placed on it. Well, it was a good thing he had his bloody sword. It may have been created by magic, but it worked just fine on the eagle. His guess was that it had to make contact to be effective.

The stone badger leapt for his face. Draco swung his sword and hit it away. He moved several feet and was trying to formulate a plan to kill it when he heard something slithering behind him. He closed his eyes. *Shit.*

Draco ran just as a large snake emerged from the shadows. He started to head towards the doors that would lead him to the Entrance Hall, but stopped when he heard a loud growl. He might as well kill a badger before running into a bloody lion.

Draco turned just as the badger made a play for his face again. He swung his sword and sliced its head off. Cutting through stone was much easier than he expected. It was probably his magical sword, but he liked to think it was just his natural skills.

The snake hissed as it came for Draco. He ran from it, dodging as the stone lion suddenly came at him. It managed to knock him and he rolled across the snow, dropping his sword as he tried to protect his head from the hard ground. He got back up and was about to '*Accio*' it into his hand when the lion came for him. He bolted. Fucking Gryffindors and their dangerous mascot.

Luckily, stone did not seem to move as fast as the living versions of these beasts, so Draco was able to get a fair distance away. He climbed onto the tall platform he knew belonged to the Slytherin snake and made an array of arrows.

Holding his arms like he would if he had a bow, Draco shot one after the other at the approaching lion and snake. The lion was a little faster and he was able to hit it in what would have been its heart as it pounced at him, successfully shattering it.

Unfortunately, at the angle the snake was approaching, it was impossible to get a direct hit to the heart, and when the arrows hit anywhere else on its body, they simply bounced off.

Draco tossed his last few arrows down in frustration and shouted, "*Accio sword*!"

The sword flew at him, reaching his hand just as the snake let out a loud, venomous hiss, hurling itself at the platform with an open mouth. Draco lifted his sword high above his head, both hands on the hilt, and jammed it down the snake's throat. Both the sword and the snake shattered.

Draco let out a breath of relief. He glanced over his shoulder at the doors leading into Hogwarts, his eyes narrowing as his hatred for Lord Voldemort only grew with his destruction of the school's monuments.

He jumped off of the platform, walked up to the doors and swung his wand. They flew open with an incredible force, an icy gust of wind entering the halls with Draco. He walked inside, a small, crooked smile forming on his lips as he saw three Death Eaters waiting there for him. Two lessers led by Rowle.

"Considering I was invited, you are all making this bloody difficult," said Draco, holding his wand firmly by his side.

"The Dark Lord is waiting for you in the Great Hall," said Rowle. "We are simply

here to lead you."

Draco's smile grew. "How unfortunate for you."

There was barely anytime for them to react before he was sending a blast between them. Rowle and one of the Death Eater's dodged but the third was hit, his arm blown off. As he screamed, Draco hit him with a Killing Curse.

Rowle tried to stun Draco but he easily sidestepped it.

"You're going to have to do better than that."

The other Death Eater, apparently taking his words to heart, hit him with a weak Cruciatus Curse. Draco's face barely flinched. He smiled again, moved his eyes to the Death Eater, and slowly said, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

A more skilled Death Eater would have been able to avoid the spell, but his fear slowed him down, and he was unable to escape the green jet of light before it hit him in the heart.

"And then there was one," said Draco, turning his eyes back to Rowle.

"Really, Malfoy?" he spat. "All of this for a fucking Mudblood?"

Draco's jaw clenched as his eyes turned to stone. His hand gripped tightly onto his wand, his body unmoving as his arm rose, sending a nonverbal Killing Curse straight for Rowle. It was the quickest he had ever cast one, even though he was not fully conscious of it, and Rowle had not even a second to react. He fell back dead and Draco stepped forward.

"Watch your fucking language," he said before spitting on the man's dead body.

"Wicked …" he heard someone faintly whisper beside him. His only indication that Ron had not been hit in any of the crossfire and successfully made it inside.

Feeling more determined than ever, Draco turned in the corridor and walked over to the doors that would lead him into the Great Hall. They opened as he approached.

Draco stood a few feet back, his gaze dark and angry as people began to slowly appear through the growing gap between the doors. Voldemort stood in the very center of the room, his Death Eaters gathered all around him. Bellatrix and Rodolphus stood faithfully on one side, Macnair, Dolohov and Quincy Nott on the other. Theo and Pansy were a little ways back with Goyle, and Astoria looked

bloody and bruised next to her father. He would have to make sure to kill him for that later.

To Draco's surprise, his father was standing rather close to the Dark Lord. He knew the placement was not an accident, because Hermione mirrored him on the other side. Bellatrix was the one holding her wand to her neck.

If Hermione was frightened, she did not show it. Her eyes were brave, her expression defiant, and something in her posture made her seem almost bored. They locked eyes and she rolled hers, a small smile curving on her lips. Draco smirked.

"Have you been giving them hell, love?" he asked.

"Every chance I get," she answered.

Draco pulled back the hood on his cloak and shook himself free from snow. He did a few stretches before asking, "What is it you would like me to do?"

Everyone turned to Hermione, even the Dark Lord, who was curious to see how she would answer.

Hermione looked around, her eyes stopping on every last one of them. She lifted her nose high in the air, in a similar manner as Bellatrix, and said, "Kill them all. I see little reason to show mercy."

Draco's smirk grew in response. "As you wish."

Without a moment's hesitation, he shot a Killing Curse at Bellatrix. Of course, it missed, because it always did, but all of them were so tightly packed together that it ended up striking the Death Eater directly behind her. To his great joy, it was Gordon Goyle, someone he had always loathed. There was a slight moment of disbelief on the younger Goyle's face, but he got over it pretty quickly as everyone began to disperse. Only Voldemort, Bellatrix, Rodolphus and Lucius stayed where they were. And Hermione, of course. She still had a wand very much poked into her throat.

"Are you not going after your son, Lucius?" asked the Dark Lord as Draco began to battle his Death Eaters.

"No, my Lord," answered Lucius. "I believe I have made my opinions on the matter very clear. Draco will not be harmed by my hand."

"Yes, let us keep your *hands* out of it," said Voldemort with a wicked smile.

He took the Elder Wand out of his pocket and pointed it at Hermione, leaving Bellatrix free to join in the scuffle.

She looked at her husband and muttered, "Do it," to him through clenched teeth. Hermione looked at them and pursed her eyebrows.

Rodolphus glanced at her before walking off. Bellatrix followed after him. With Voldemort distracted, Hermione took the knife she had stolen from Rodolphus earlier - while he was preoccupied sniffing her hair. She sliced through her binds, allowing her to use magic once more. The first thing she did was cast the spell on her ears to hone in on their conversation.

"Do it, husband! Do it now or you will *never* have your Mudblood to yourself!"

"The Dark Lord will kill me on sight if I do it and you know it!"

"Not if you make it look like an accident!"

Rodolphus turned away from her and let out a frustrated breath. "Your power is dwindling, *wife*, and I would rather have her just once more than never again. If you want Draco dead then you are going to have to do it yourself."

Bellatrix huffed and stamped her foot. She was like a child having a tantrum. "I will then!"

Hermione's eyes widened. They were not supposed to kill Draco! Voldemort wanted him alive. Surely, Bellatrix would never go against her Lord like this.

Her gaze turned to Draco, who was playing the part of Imperiused servant well. He had already taken down Macnair and another one of the Death Eaters she had never known. He almost had Dolohov but Quincy Nott got in the way, shooting a powerful Cruciatus Curse at him that he had to dodge with a somersault.

While Draco was down on his knees, Arron Greengrass tried to blast him with some spell, but Theo knocked him - by accident, of course - and the spell ended up hitting ten feet too high, striking a phoenix statue decorating the walls. It was now close to crumbling.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione noticed Bellatrix look up at it. The statue was just above where Draco was standing now. If it happened to fall, the heavy stone would surely crush him.

Bellatrix lifted her wand. She positioned it just right so it looked like it was aimed at Draco, but actually pointed slightly upward at the statue, and she silently cast a

spell to send it all falling down.

"NO! Draco!"

Hermione could not help her scream as she raised her arms and focused all of her energy on that statue. It was the strongest wandless magic she had ever done, but the thought of losing Draco when they had already come so far was all the strength she needed to stop the statue from falling, and levitating the crumbling pieces mere centimeters above his head.

Draco barely noticed the statue as he suddenly looked at her. Their eyes locked and a silent moment of clarity passed between them. Hermione had just made a terrible error in their game and they both knew it. It was not that she had saved him, that was to be expected, but that scream, that cry out for him as death came so close. *That* showed that it was not just a game for her. It showed that she cared. And the way Voldemort was looking at her now … he definitely did not miss it.

The entire room was silent. Hermione wanted to take a deep breath to relax herself, but held it back since it would not be missed in the eerie silence. She knew she had to play this off somehow. So, without another thought, she waved her hand and tossed the statue aside. Her eyes then moved to Bellatrix, narrowing as she met the gaze of the other witch.

"I believe your *master* wants Draco alive," she spat.

"It was an accident, my Lord," said Bellatrix. "I did not mean to -"

"Yes you did!" shouted Hermione. "I heard you speaking with Rodolphus just now! You wanted him to kill Draco in exchange for me and, when he refused, you decided to take matters into your own hands! Some fucking servant." She sneered. "Draco would never betray my orders like that."

Draco stood very still. Voldemort looked at him for a split second. "Grab him," he ordered Quincy and Dolohov. They obeyed, Quincy being the one to take his wand away. Draco meant to struggle but, at this point, he knew he had to give in. There was a good chance they had just been exposed and, if they had, he would need that extra time to get them out.

"Bellatrix." Voldemort beckoned her with his finger.

Bellatrix walked over slowly. This was the first time Hermione could recall her ever looking nervous.

"Yes, my Lord," she said upon arrival.

"Is what she says true?"

Bellatrix looked at Hermione and lifted her nose. "Of course not, my Lord. This filthy Mudblood has been telling us nothing but lies since she arrived here."

Voldemort took a deep, rattling breath through his snake-like nostrils. It was obvious that he did not believe her. Hermione did her best to hide her relief.

"You have wanted Draco dead for a long time, Bellatrix, yet you have known about the prophecy from the very beginning. Tell me, why is it you are so dead-set against me on this?"

"I … I am not, my -"

"Now, Bellatrix, don't you think it is time you stop lying to your dear master." Voldemort lifted a hand, rubbing his long, bone-like fingers along her strong jaw.

Bellatrix gulped. "I just do not understand why you insist on finding Harry Potter, my Lord. You have won. He has shown no signs of coming out of hiding. He is not like you. Eventually, he will die. Why do you need -?"

"So you believe I should simply let the one prophesized to have the power to vanquish me roam free?"

Bellatrix went white. "N-no, my Lord. But if Draco is the only one who can bring him out of hiding … My Lord, if Draco is dead then Harry Potter will never come. You have already *won*, my Lord! Please, just let it go! Dispose of Draco and -"

"I have won nothing until Harry Potter is dead by my hand!"

The entire room cowered in fear, none more than Bellatrix. This was perhaps the first time any of them had heard the Dark Lord raise his voice. Bronson had told Hermione about the prophecy when they were locked up in the dungeons together, so she was not ignorant to what they were talking about. Draco did not seem to be either. He stood there calmly with Quincy and Dolohov on either side of him.

"You will be punished for your betrayal later, Bellatrix," hissed Voldemort. "But, for now, I will need you to check Draco for the Imperius Curse."

Bellatrix looked at Draco. He winked, making her cheeks flush a bright crimson.

"I said now!"

Bellatrix took a deep breath and stepped towards Draco. She put her wand up to his forehead and began searching. She was far from gentle as she went through his mind. A hideous scowl spread across her face as she finally came across what she had dreaded.

"It is here, my Lord."

"And is it your blood traitor sister's wand that did it?"

Bellatrix took a deep breath. "Yes. It is Andromeda's. But she is with them now, my Lord! Surely she just put it in place just before he came -"

"Remove it," ordered Voldemort.

Bellatrix looked at him and nodded. She returned to Draco's mind and went about the complicated task of removing the Imperius Curse.

When she was finished, Draco was left standing there, his eyes vacant as they slowly moved to look at Hermione. He stared at her unblinking for a while, and then his face slowly fell into a very convincing scowl that was filled with loathing and disgust.

"You filthy, fucking -"

"Draco."

Draco snapped his head towards the Dark Lord.

"I do not have time for these games," said Voldemort. "So I have already devised a little something for you."

He waved his wand. There was a loud noise that had everyone looking around, stopping as they noticed a stone basin emerging from the floor in the center of the room. It was carved with runes and strange symbols, and the silvery substance that filled it was both liquid and cloud-like, seeming to come straight out of the heavens. It was Dumbledore's Pensieve.

"I have a memory I would like you to see," said Voldemort, stepping forward. He already had his wand to his head and was pulling out a silver, hair-like wisp. "It is mine, but the majority of people in this room could show it to you." He looked over his shoulder at Hermione. "Even your Mudblood."

Hermione suddenly felt very nervous. On instinct, she glanced at Lucius, who was shaking as sweat dripped down his forehead. He turned his head to look at her, only catching her eye for a split second before ashamedly glancing at the floor. Suddenly, Hermione was all too aware of the memory Draco would be viewing.

Draco stepped up to the Pensieve, watching as Voldemort put his memory inside of it, the silver string swirling with the liquid clouds in beautiful unison.

"If you have truly been Imperiused for all of this time, and care nothing for this girl, then you will be completely unaffected by what you see. Shall we give it a try?"

Draco looked nervously into the basin. He knew the memory was most certainly of Hermione being beaten and raped, and he would somehow have to hold back all emotion. He believed he could do it, so he pushed himself forward with his own naivety, and emerged his head into the silvery substance.

Draco had been wondering if the Dark Lord was going to follow him in there, and was relieved when he did not. The walls of the Great Hall began to melt away and Draco was soon surrounded by the familiar drawing room of Malfoy Manor. Death Eaters were scattered around the large space, drinking, and shouting, and laughing joyously as Bellatrix tortured someone in the center of it all. It was a young Hermione. She was bruised and bloody, but her face was smooth, completely free of the many scars she had accumulated through her years of suffering. Her eyes were fearful as Bellatrix pulled her up by her hair.

"Is your precious Harry Potter coming to save you, Mudblood? Is your blood traitor boyfriend on his way here right now?"

Hermione tried to push her off, so Bellatrix gripped harder, causing her to scream.

"You disgust me."

Bellatrix spit on her before tossing her back onto the floor.

"Lucius, step forward," ordered Voldemort. He sat in an armchair and was drinking a glass of brandy slowly through what should have been his lips.

Lucius, who had been sitting on the sofa with his head in his hands, slowly stood and walked towards the Dark Lord. "Y-yes, my Lord." His eyes were red and puffy, his voice crackly as he obviously mourned the recent loss of his wife.

"I am very disappointed in your family, Lucius," said Voldemort, taking another sip of his drink. "First, your son betrayed us by not fighting for our side, and then your wife led us all to believe that Harry Potter had perished. What do you have to say

for yourself?"

"My … my son is young, my Lord," said Lucius. "He knew not the seriousness of what he was doing. He was just afraid. And my wife -"

"Your wife has already been judged, and her penalty was given," said Voldemort, smiling affectionately at Bellatrix. "The current matter at hand is what to do with young Draco."

"Please, my Lord," pleaded Lucius. "Please, I beg of you, spare my son. Pardon him this once for his … his lack of action. He will never betray you again, my Lord. He watched his mother die, he knows better now."

"Tell me, Lucius, how far would you go to ensure Draco's survival?"

Lucius, who had been whimpering, suddenly sucked it all back. He looked very seriously at the Dark Lord and in a clear voice stated, "I would go to hell and back, my Lord."

Voldemort's lipless mouth curved into a wicked grin. "Good." He put down his brandy and stood from his seat. "Bellatrix, bring us the Mudblood."

Bellatrix grabbed Hermione by the hair again, and dragged her towards the Dark Lord and Lucius. She threw her at their feet. Hermione landed hard, catching herself on her hands but her wrist twisted at a strange angle.

"Take her, Lucius."

Lucius, who had been staring down at Hermione, suddenly brought his head up to look at his master. His jaw fell. "M-my Lord … what -?"

"I said take her," repeated Voldemort. "Right here, right now. Show this filthy excuse for a witch what happens when you choose to fight for the wrong side."

Draco's heart fell hard into his stomach. Half of it stopped, feeling as if a hand was crushing the life out of it, while the other half began beating at an incredible speed. He took several steps back. He was too close. He was too -

"You see, Theo. These are the gifts that are given when you join the Dark Lord."

Draco froze. The air around him became icy and cool as he saw Theo and Quincy out of the corner of his eye, watching. Hearing and seeing everything. He knew.

"My Lord, please. My wife -"

"Is dead," Voldemort said coldly. "Don't make me tell you again."

Lucius looked down at Hermione once more. She was staring up at him, her eyes frightened as he took out his wand.

"No!" she screamed as he bound her wrists. "Please, no!"

Lucius pulled her to her feet and pushed her towards the closest table. As they moved, Draco suddenly became very aware of the thunder echoing through the room. A flash of lightning lit up the dark and dreary space, only adding to the growing fear in Hermione's eyes.

Lucius tossed her on top of the table. He closed his eyes for a brief moment and took a deep breath. Hermione tried to struggle so he cast a spell fastening her bound wrists to the wall.

"NO!" she screamed louder. "PLEASE! Please, stop!"

But Lucius did not listen. His eyes glazed over as he began to undo his trousers.

"Please …" she repeated much quieter this time. Lucius stood very still. He let his eyes focus and looked at the frightened girl beneath him. "I … I'm a virgin."

The little life still inside of Lucius left him in that moment. First, he had lost his wife, and now this was happening. He would never be forgiven. His eyes darkened as a single tear dripped down his cheek.

"What is this?" sang Bellatrix. "A *virgin*!" She cackled with excitement and everyone joined in.

"Do it, Lucius," ordered Voldemort, who was far less amused than the others.

"No!" screamed Draco, running forward. "Father, no! Please!" he pleaded, forgetting that he could not hear him, could not see him. He could not stop this, because it had already happened. This was a memory, and memories could never be changed. "Please, leave her be! Let me die, Father! LET HIM KILL ME!"

Lucius blinked his eyes several times. They stopped on Hermione one final time, and he slowly mouthed the words, "I'm sorry."

Tears poured down Hermione's cheeks as she suddenly realized all hope was lost. Lucius closed his eyes as he began to remove her trousers.

Draco ran as Hermione began to scream, both her cries and the thunder

resonating in his ears. He tried to cover them but the sounds were too strong, and the moment her innocence was stolen from her was made painfully clear by the horrible cry she let out.

Draco cowered in a corner, trying hard to send his mind somewhere else, anywhere else so he would not have to hear it. But there was nothing. No moment could take him away from this.

Hermione had lied to him. She had told him she did not remember who the first was, and he had let himself believe her. Because the truth, something he had always known deep down, was far worse than the lie. Her hatred for Lucius delved so much deeper than him raping her. She hated him the most because he was the first. The one to hurt her in the worst way imaginable. By taking something she could never get back, no matter how much she and Draco tried to pretend.

Finally, her screams died down. Draco opened his eyes and looked over to see his father stepping away from her while redoing his trousers.

"Well done, Lucius," said Voldemort as he stepped up behind him. "It has been a long time since you've had someone so young. Tell me, was *hell* everything you imagined it would be?"

His father did not answer.

"Would you like to keep her? Perhaps she could keep your wife's side of the bed warm, since she will not be there to heat it for you."

Lucius gulped. He stared down at Hermione, crying and curled into a ball as she tried to cover herself. One look at the blood on her thighs caused Lucius's face to contort in what most would view as disgust. But Draco was not fooled. He knew it was pain.

"No," said Lucius. "I will not be having her again."

"No!" said Draco, running forward once more. "No, tell him you want her! If you take her no one else will be able to touch her! Please -"

"Was it really that terrible?" asked Voldemort with a laugh. "Would anyone else like to judge for themselves?"

Several Death Eaters moved forward, but it was Rodolphus who got to her first, his eyes filled with lust as he began to touch the beaten girl on the table.

"NO!" screamed Draco. "LET ME OUT OF HERE!"

He ran towards the door, wanting to yank on the handle but his hand went right through it. In a desperate attempt to escape, he walked into it, unknowingly bringing himself into another memory. A forgotten memory. *His* memory.

Draco stared down the hall covered with portraits of his ancestors, all of them laughing as they listened to the events going on in the drawing room. The front door burst open and they all became silent, watching as a young Draco moved slowly down the corridor.

Lightning lit up the manor through the high windows, revealing his dead eyes as he moved in a trance-like state. He was soaking wet and covered in mud, his hands shaking as he looked down at his dirty fingernails, filled with the earth that now covered his mother's dead body.

Draco stopped as he reached the door to the drawing room, his swollen eyes seeming to look right through it. He had heard her. Hermione. There was no mistaking those screams and, even then, he knew who they belonged to.

The young Draco gulped. Tears fell from his eyes as he backed away from the door. He turned away from it. From *her*. He left her there to suffer and continued down the corridor.

"GET BACK HERE, YOU COWARD!" Draco shouted at the selfish boy he used to be.

He ran after him. After a few steps, the younger Draco had stopped and listened again.

"You can't leave her!" he cried, tears falling from his eyes as his voice became strained. "Why won't you save her?"

With a deep breath, his younger self continued, slowly disappearing into the manor and leaving Hermione behind.

Draco fell to his knees, crying so hard that he barely noticed as the walls around him began to change. The world morphed back to a time where he had to live with the choices he had made that day, a harsh hand grabbing onto his shoulder and yanking him out of the Pensieve. As Draco stumbled back, he gasped for air as if he had been drowning, clutching his heart for a moment while he adjusted to being torn from the memory so abruptly. It had not finished, meaning Hermione was still suffering in there. Looking at her in this present moment, he realized that she was still suffering now. She had kept something so important from him. He already knew that loving him could not have been easy for her, but now it was so much

worse. He did not know why his father being the first was even more horrible than him just being a number on a line, but it was. It truly and deeply was.

"You have seen enough, Draco," said Voldemort, removing his bony hand from Draco's shoulder and stepping back. "Tell us, what do you feel about what you have seen?"

There was an eerie sense of calm as Draco looked at Hermione - who was trying to seem unaffected by what she knew he had just seen - and then his father.

Draco stood up straight, cracked his knuckles and took one steady breath.

He tried to hold himself together, he truly did, which is why he had no recollection of summoning his wand from Quincy, aiming it at his father and casting a Killing Curse. Lucius, who had been expecting it, dodged quickly. Unfortunately, the Imperiused Death Eater, Sage, who was standing behind him was not so lucky.

Draco went for Lucius again. Several Death Eaters moved to intervene but Voldemort held up a hand to stop them. He wanted to see how this played out.

No matter how many times Draco tried to curse Lucius, the older Malfoy would not raise his wand. But he was not against running like hell.

"Draco, stop it!" shouted Hermione.

But he could not hear her. His mind was only focused on one thing, and that was killing his father.

Lucius headed her way and Hermione took this moment to act. She ran in front of him, held out her hands and shouted, "I said STOP!"

"Get out of the way, Hermione!" spat Draco, his wand not even lowering slightly. "I couldn't do it before, but I can *fucking* do it now! I can kill him!"

"No!" she screamed. "Draco Malfoy, you *cannot* kill your father!"

"Yes I can -"

"No," she repeated. "You cannot kill him because you do not hate him. You will never forgive yourself if you do."

"But I do hate him!"

"No you don't. You hate what he did to me. There's a difference."

"Who cares?" spat Bellatrix. "Let Draco kill him, Mudblood. This is the only chance you will ever get to obtain vengeance."

Hermione scowled at her. "This is not vengeance! It's a game! It's all a bloody game, and Draco and I will not play any longer! My true vengeance will come the day you and your master are rotting in your graves! When neither of you are around to continually tear families apart!"

"Draco, I'm sorry!" cried Lucius, stepping forward. He put a hand on Hermione's arm to move past her. "I did not mean to -"

"DON'T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HER!" shouted Draco, raising his wand higher.

Hermione moved in front of Lucius again.

"You lied to me! You said you didn't remember who the first was!" he cried. "How can you look at me? How can you be with me when my father was the one to hurt you like that?"

Hermione whimpered. She gazed into his hard eyes and quietly said, "Because I love you."

And with those simple words, Draco's anger melted away. Not all of it, but enough for him to lower his hand while hot tears fell from his eyes.

Rodolphus felt a horrible, throbbing pain in his heart as he watched Hermione and Draco gaze at each other. It was a look he had never seen her give before. One he had always wanted, always imagined being aimed at him. But it was not him. It was Draco. Suddenly, he found himself silently admitting something that he had not dared admit before. He loved her. A Mudblood.

She was strong, intelligent, beautiful … everything he had always wanted in a companion but never had the chance to find after being forced into a loveless marriage by his prejudiced parents, who were surely turning in their graves. But watching the witch he loved confessing her feelings for someone else right in front of him … he never would have believed it could happen before, but his heart … his poor, aching heart was actually broken.

"*Expelliarmus*!"

Rodolphus was torn out of his daze as Voldemort seized Draco's wand.

Draco was still focused on Hermione, his face sinking as he realized the reality of what he had just done. He had failed the Dark Lord's test, proving that he cared

for Hermione. Or, as most people in this room liked to refer to her, Harry Potter's Mudblood.

While Draco had always assumed his true intentions would be discovered, he had not expected it to be this soon.

"I am very disappointed in you, Draco," said Voldemort as he placed the wand in his pocket. He looked at Quincy. "Lock him up. Keep him isolated, and make sure to keep someone on guard outside of his door at all times."

Quincy nodded. "And the Mudblood?" He looked at her and licked his lips.

"I have already promised her to Rodolphus." Voldemort looked at his loyal servant. "She is yours up to sunset. Do what you want with her until then." He tore the knife Hermione still held out of her hands and ran it across her throat. "I recommend a little torture."

Hermione grabbed Voldemort's arm and shoved him away from her. He laughed hoarsely while his servants gasped.

"How dare you!"

Bellatrix was about to curse her when Voldemort put his hand out in front of her. "She does not belong to you, Bellatrix. Any pain she endures must come from your husband's hands."

"And after sunset?" she asked. "Then who will she belong to?"

Voldemort moved his gaze to Draco and smiled wickedly. "I am sure you have read enough literature to realize there is never a happy ending for star-crossed lovers, Draco."

Draco said nothing. His eyes were still on Hermione.

"As much as I would *love* to kill you," hissed Voldemort, "I need you alive. And, preferably, obedient. When sunset arrives, you will be Imperiused. You will be my puppet, in every sense of the word. I will pull the strings, but your emotions will still be intact. You will still be very aware of your love for this *Mudblood* when you cut her heart out of her chest. She will die slowly, and you will both feel every last excruciating moment of pain."

Voldemort moved his face so it was mere inches from Draco's, forcing him to look into his eyes. In a swift movement, Draco put his hands on Voldemort's shoulders and sent him flying backwards with his wandless magic. When Death Eaters

started coming at him, he spread his arms out on either side of him and sent them all sliding across the floor.

Quincy tried to grab Hermione from behind. She flipped him over her shoulder, held her hand out and stunned him. She and Draco took this moment to run into each other's arms.

While holding her close, Draco whispered into Hermione's ear, "Potter is coming, so just hold on."

Hermione nodded.

"I love you."

"I love you too," she whispered back.

Their eyes remained focused on each other, silver on amber, as they were suddenly ripped apart. Hermione screamed for Draco as her wrists were bound with the magical rope and she was dragged away from him.

Draco tried to run for her, but the rope was bound around his wrists, as well, and he could not get away. Someone hit him with a spell that knocked him to his knees. And then there was a Cruciatus Curse. And another. And another.

After everything he had seen, Draco did not have the strength to fight it as he had that day when images of a future with Hermione kept him strong. The only hope he even felt as the world went black was when he saw Theo clutching onto what must have been an invisible wrist as he and Pansy exited the Great Hall.

Theo looked over his shoulder at him, giving a small nod of understanding. Hermione came first. She would not be touched. Draco let the darkness take over, knowing that one of the only true friend's he had in his life would be keeping the girl he loved safe.

Hermione continued to scream as Rodolphus dragged her through the corridors of a place that had once been so dear to her, but now only held memories she would rather soon forget. Memories of pain. Loss. Fate …

Rodolphus did not stop until he reached a door in the professors' quarters. He opened it and shoved her inside. The moment the door was closed, Hermione came at him, trying to grab the knife back, until she realized Voldemort had never returned it to him. She hit Rodolphus hard in the nose with her bound wrists.

"FUCK!" he shouted, waving his wand and sending her flying back against the

wall. The ropes tore and chains came out of the stone, confining her wrists and ankles. "Relax, Mudblood!"

"NO!" she screamed. "No! You won't have me! You will *never* have me!"

Rodolphus stared blankly at her for a moment before pulling a small bottle out of his pocket. Hermione immediately thought of the Amortentia.

"NO!" She struggled to break free as he approached her. "No amount of magic will ever make me love you!" she cried.

Rodolphus wiped at his nose, which was bleeding. "It's not a love potion, it's a Sleeping Draught," he said. "Now bloody relax or - AH!"

Hermione successfully used her wandless magic to break one wrist free. She used it to slug him hard in the face, only adding to the already throbbing pain of his nose.

"STOP IT!" he shouted, grabbing her throat and trying to force the potion into her mouth.

Hermione tried to spit it out, but a small amount still managed to seep down. Tears filled her eyes as the world suddenly became hazy. "Draco …" was the last word to escape her lips before everything became dark around her.

The moment she was asleep, Rodolphus removed the chains and let her fall heavily into his arms. He lifted her up and carried her over to the bed, laying her down before sitting beside her. Her hair fell loosely in front of her face and he found himself brushing it behind her ear, desperate to see her eyes. But he could not see the amber pools he had been longing for since the day she had left him, because her eyes were closed. Because when she was asleep was the only time he could touch her without having to hear her screams. To see her pain.

Rodolphus leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. As soft as he remembered. He tried hard to push himself forward, to simply take her as he always had, but he could not do it. He could not have her like that again.

While watching her in the Great Hall, he had realized something. This desire he felt for her … it was not just about possession. What he wanted more than anything was for her to look at him in the same way she had looked at Draco. For her to tell him that she loved him, and to mean it. No spells, no potions, no bloody brainwashing or manipulation. Just her.

Rodolphus cried as his fingers tangled in her hair. He pressed his forehead

against hers, their lips no longer touching.

He had done this all wrong. He should have never just forced her that first time as he had. When the slave trade began, he should have taken her in. Shown her compassion. Shown her kindness. Shown her love.

But the damage was done and, while he finally had her where he had always thought he wanted her, he could not do it. He could not have her this one last time. Because he loved her. But because of his past mistakes, his precious Mudblood … Hermione. Her name was Hermione. And she would never love him in return.

# Chapter 46: Golden Slumbers

**A/N: As expected, this part ended up being *way* longer than I originally planned. So *now* there are four chapters left. Yay for an even fifty!**

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Hermione's eyelashes fluttered as the heaviness of sleep slowly began to leave her body. She instinctually reached for Draco next to her, only to find that he was not there. Her eyes opened and she searched for him in the darkness of the room. As they began to focus, so did her mind, and it not take her long to remember that she was not in the safety of her room at the resistance's base. She was in Hogwarts, locked in a room with a man that was beyond obsessed with her.

Hermione shot up and ran her hands frantically across her body. She was fully clothed. Relief washed over her. Her eyes began to tear as she clutched onto the fabric of her jumper.

"You can relax. I did not touch you."

It took Hermione a moment to register the damaged voice. Rodolphus. She gulped as she looked to the edge of the bed, barely making out his silhouette sitting there in the dark. His back was to her, but she could see that he had his wand resting on his knee. A silent warning.

"How long was I out?" she asked, eager to know how much time she had to get her and Draco out of here before her execution.

"Less than ten minutes," answered Rodolphus. "It seems you did not get much of that potion down, and it was already weak. I was not trying to put you out for long." He flicked his wand and the lights turned back on.

Rodolphus stood up and Hermione leapt off of the bed, readying herself to strike. His eyes saddened as he placed his wand in his pocket. He brought his fingers up to his throat.

"I am not going to touch you, Hermione. You can stop with the defenses."

Hermione froze. "Why are you calling me that?"

"Because it's your name," he said. "Don't look so shocked that I actually know it."

Hermione said nothing.

"Would you prefer Mudblood?"

She shook her head.

They were both silent. Hermione slowly began to ease her stance.

"I don't understand," she said. "You want revenge against me. You threatened Draco so he would try harder to find me, you bought all of that Amortentia, you have been trying to get me back in your possession for months. Well, you have me. Defenseless. So why aren't you doing anything?"

"You're hardly defenseless," he said, pointing to his still bruised nose, though it did look significantly better.

"I've learned a few tricks since I've been free," said Hermione.

"Yes, I noticed that. Your magic is pretty decent without a wand. But it would probably be better with one."

Rodolphus reached into his pocket and pulled something out. He held it in front of her.

Hermione gasped. There, in his hand, was a wand. But not just any wand. 10 ¾ inches, vine wood, with a dragon heartstring core. It was *her* wand. The one she had thought was lost forever.

"Where did you find that?" she asked, her eyes wet as she looked past the wand to the man standing behind it.

"My wife mentioned something in passing many years ago about torturing you at Malfoy Manor after you had been brought there by Greyback. I had to pay a pretty price for it, but he was more than willing to let it go."

Hermione moved her gaze back to the wand.

"Go on," he said. "Take it."

She slowly lifted her hand. It was shaking as she wrapped her fingers around her wand for the first time in five years. The connection she felt with it surrounded her like a protective shield, and the magic she had not felt in years pulsed through her veins.

"When did you purchase it from him?" she asked.

"It was the same day I purchased the Amortentia," he answered honestly.

Hermione tried to take a step back from him, but almost immediately hit wall.

"It was pathetic, I admit it," said Rodolphus, moving even closer to her. "But I was desperate to have you. To get you away from my brother, and Bella, and the Dark Lord." His hand lifted, and he cupped her cheek before slowly gripping onto her hair. "I wanted you back, but I knew you would be executed shortly after and I … I couldn't lose you. Not again."

Hermione recoiled from his touch. "Stop it," she demanded.

Rodolphus's hand moved to the wall beside her.

"I don't understand you," she said, meeting his gaze with her own. "I stabbed you. I stabbed you in the gut, I slit your throat, and then I left you for dead. You barely crossed my mind before I found out you were still alive. I feel *nothing* for you. So why are you doing this? Why are you giving me my wand? Why are you not forcing me onto that bed right now and having your revenge? It's what you want, isn't it? To *fuck* me one last time! TO RAPE ME!"

Hermione shoved him back and aimed her wand at him. But Rodolphus just stood there. He did not draw his own wand, or tense in anger. He was, if anything, completely calm.

"You have been spending too much time with Draco. That foul language does not suit you at all."

Hermione's nostrils flared as hot tears dripped down her cheeks. She kept her wand pointed fervently.

"I know it sounds revolting," said Rodolphus, casting his eyes to the floor. "But I … I truly didn't believe that I was. Raping you." He closed his eyes. "Not beyond that first time. I thought that … since I was kinder than the others … that you liked it. That you wanted to be with me."

It took Hermione a moment to realize he was crying. Her wand lowered slightly.

"I look back at it now, and I see I was wrong," he said, lifting his eyes to meet hers. "Because you've never looked at me like that. The way you look at him. Not once." He moved forward, pinning Hermione's hand with the wand to her side and clutching her cheek again. And then, through his raspy, spell-less throat, he slowly whispered, "I love you."

Rodolphus pulled her head forward and forced her to kiss him. Hermione tried to

bite him but his grip on her was too strong. She brought her free hand up to his chest and powerfully shoved him away.

"STOP IT!" she shouted. "I do not belong to you, Lestrange! I belong to Draco! And he is the only one I will *ever* love in that way! Understand?"

Rodolphus nodded slowly. "I know," he said. "I just … needed that last time."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the door. Hermione pulled back. He turned and clutched her wrist.

"I am well aware that it is against your nature but, from here on out, you need to cooperate."

Rodolphus reached for the door handle. He paused.

"Someone has been trying to get in," he said. He waved his wand to remove the shields he had placed, then he peeked into the corridor. It was clear.

Still clutching Hermione's wrist, Rodolphus dragged her out of the room and started walking determinedly down the hall.

"Where are we going?" she demanded.

Rodolphus stopped before the corner and looked around it. Clear. He marched on.

"We are getting you out," he answered.

"What?" Hermione pulled back, but he kept a firm grip and dragged her forward. "Stop! STOP!" She pointed her wand at him.

Rodolphus stopped walking and turned towards her.

"I am not going *anywhere* without Draco!"

"I figured as much," said Rodolphus.

Hermione's eyebrows pursed but she kept her wand raised.

"The Dark Lord placed powerful shields around a classroom for him before he even got here. It's this way." He tugged her in the direction they had already been going.

"You're … you're taking me to him?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "But we do not have long before whoever was trying to break into our room discovers we're no longer there, so I suggest you stop fighting me on this and just move."

Hermione breathed in deeply. She was so confused in this moment. Rodolphus was someone she truly hated. The lowest type of person imaginable. But, while she did not want to trust him, she knew, deep down, that he truly did care for her in his own twisted way. And he wanted her to live. So she lowered her wand, nodded, and let him pull her around the next corner. At this moment, he was her only means for reaching Draco. And she needed to find him. To apologize for keeping something so important from him. To remind him that she loved him more than life itself. And, together, they were going to win this war, and they were going to survive.

<center>XXX</center>

Draco lay on the lab table with his eyes wide and aimed at the ceiling. He had woken up a good five minutes ago and, after rampaging around, he had quickly discovered that there was no exit from this room. It had obviously been prepared for him. Anti-magic barriers, thoroughly searched for any hidden passageways, and absolutely no windows or clocks, so he had no way of knowing how long he had been unconscious for.

His fists clenched at his sides, his nails digging into his flesh and drawing blood as he thought of Hermione. Locked in a room with Rodolphus. The wizard who had been lusting after her for years now. It was not so farfetched to say that he was obsessed. Not to say that Draco was not obsessed with her himself, but the difference was his obsession was reciprocated. She was as crazy when it came to him as he was when it came to her. That was why they were both here. Trapped.

It killed him that he had to rely on Theo, Pansy and Ron to save her, but he had done all he could. And he had failed. Letting that horrible memory consume him, even when he knew what it would cost. And Hermione had protected his father, stepping in front of him and refusing to let Draco kill him. Without that death on his hands, it had truly all been for nothing. He had failed her for nothing.

What if his friends were too late? What if Rodolphus did something to her before they could get in? What if he still had Amortentia and ran with her? What if his obsession possessed him to kill her?

Tears fell smoothly from Draco's eyes. He was so distraught that he could not even bring himself to whimper. He was just numb. If his actions had cost Hermione her life or, worse, her freewill, he could never forgive himself. He was not even

sure he could bring himself to fight when the time came. Not without her by his side. Where she belonged.

Draco could hear faint voices outside of his door. He pulled out of his thoughts and tried to listen, but his hearing was definitely limited without magic. It sounded like someone was casting a spell, but all he heard was, "- *rio*!"

The voices went quiet. He thought he heard a few more spells, and then his door was opening. Draco shot up. It could not be sunset already. Even though he had no concept of time down here, he knew it had not been that long. An hour at most. So then who was it?

Draco leapt off the table and prepared himself for the worst. But then, a soft hand curved around the door. His heart stopped as his beloved stepped through. Hermione.

She searched the dark classroom until she found him, sobbing the moment their eyes met. She seemed as surprised to see him as he was to see her.

"It's really you …" she whispered, but it seemed to be more for herself than for him.

But Draco knew better than to just trust his eyes. He needed to trust his heart. "When did I first tell you I loved you?" he asked.

Hermione sucked back her tears and said, "Christmas. Just before we left for Andromeda's. And when did I say it back?"

Draco could feel the numbness leave his body, and he began to sob. "Later that night," he answered. "After I put the ring on my mother's chain."

Hermione left the doorway and ran into his arms. They both cried as they held each other.

"I'm sorry, Draco!" she said. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you before about your father! At first I didn't think it mattered. But then everything changed between us and I … I was afraid you wouldn't want me anymore. And I just … I couldn't let that happen. Because I love you, Draco. I love you so much and I couldn't bear it if I lost you. You're everything to me. Please … please don't let this change us."

"Hermione." Draco pulled back and cupped her wet cheeks in his hands. "This changes nothing, all right?"

She nodded.

"I love you. And nothing will *ever* change that. I tried to leave you once and it didn't work, remember?"

She nodded again.

"Because you're everything to me too."

Draco pressed his lips to her. The two of them kissed heatedly while hot tears dripped onto their tongues.

Someone cleared their throat.

Draco opened his eyes to see Rodolphus shutting the door. Draco moved Hermione behind him and stood protectively in front of her.

"What the fuck are you -?"

"Draco, it's fine!" Hermione shouted from behind him. "He's the one who brought me here."

Draco looked at her and cocked an eyebrow. "Why?"

Hermione shrugged. "I'm not really sure, but he says he wants to get me out."

Now Draco looked at Rodolphus, eyebrow still cocked. "Why?"

Rodolphus fidgeted and looked elsewhere. "Do I need a reason?"

"Fuck yeah you do," said Draco. "You have been trying to recapture her since the day she escaped, and now you want to let her go? Perhaps you can understand why I don't fucking believe you."

"Draco!" snapped Hermione. "What could he *possibly* gain from bringing me here? We were already captured and wandless, and this room has so many charms on it that it could have held Dumbledore himself!"

"Yes, but -"

"He's as defenseless standing in here as we are right now. So why don't you just -"

The door to the room slowly creaked open. They all froze, their faces going white. *Shit.*

But no one entered, and the three of them stood very still as the door suddenly closed. They all stared at it in silence, Hermione's fingers digging into Draco's arm.

Draco took a shot in the dark and said, "Weasel?"

"Uh … yeah."

"Really?" said Draco. "Because you don't sound too fucking sure about that."

"Wait, Ron?" snapped Hermione. "Why are *you* here?"

"Umm …" His voice seemed to have moved. Definitely away from Rodolphus.

"Show yourself, Weasel," demanded Draco. "There's no magic in here. Roddy can't fucking do anything."

"But … well, I'm not alone, you see." Someone whispered something to him. "And we would all feel better if he was tied up or something."

"And just what do you propose we tie him with?" said Draco. "There's nothing fucking here."

"But -"

"Roddy, move away from the door."

Rodolphus looked at Draco and raised his eyebrows.

"Go stand in the corner or something."

"Excuse me?"

He looked ready to strike until his eyes caught sight of Hermione. She stared right at him, took a deep breath and said, "Please."

Rodolphus looked sadly at the way she clung to Draco's arm before nodding and walking to the corner opposite Ron's voice.

"All right, you and whoever else can come out now."

"Oh thank fucking Merlin!" exclaimed Theo as he tore the invisibility cloak off of them. "*That* bloody thing is *not* designed for three fucking grown people, Weasel!"

"Harry, Hermione and I used to all fit in it …"

"When you were twelve, maybe," said Pansy, gasping for fresh air.

Hermione's mouth fell open as she gazed at Theo. He smiled at her. "Hey, Granger."

There was something familiar about that smile, and Hermione knew it instantly. She and Bronson used to talk about it. Theo's smiles were rare. He was shier than he let on and he never gave one without reason. But there were these occasional moments, when he would look at someone he would never admit he was fond of, namely the two of them or Draco, where his eyes would actually light up as a very faint blush spread across his cheeks. Bronson often found himself walking in and out of rooms just to try and get one. But Hermione would laugh and Theo would immediately become insecure, using many obscenities to tell them how strange they were before secluding himself in his room.

And Hermione was positive she was receiving one of these smiles now. Because they were friends, and he was happy to see her. Because he remembered her.

Her eyes grew wet as she ran forward and threw her arms around him, accidentally knocking them both to the floor.

"You lying bastard!" she screamed. "Don't you ever, *EVER* sacrifice yourself for us again! You hear me?"

"Ow, Granger! You knocked my fucking hea -"

"YOU HEAR ME?"

"Yes, yes!" he said with a chuckle. "No more sacrificing. Got it."

"Hermione, if you could get off of the other man now, I would really appreciate it," said Draco, grabbing her hand and pulling her back to her feet.

"Sorry," she said, still clinging to Theo and pulling him up with her. "He's a liar."

"Yes, I know," said Draco.

"So you really *have* been faking it this entire time," said Rodolphus from his corner. "I owe your father ten Galleons."

Theo looked at him and sneered. "That is a bet you will never be able to collect on, *Roddy.*" He suddenly grabbed Ron's sword out of its holster and pointed it at Rodolphus.

"Whoa, whoa, hold on there!" said Pansy, putting her hand on Theo's and lowering the sword. "Why is he even here?"

"Why are *you* even here?" asked Draco. "You were supposed to be getting Hermione out."

"Yeah, that's what we were doing," said Ron.

"So it was you who was trying to break through my shields?" asked Rodolphus.

"Yes," said Ron. "Well … sort of."

"Sort of," repeated Draco. "What the fuck does that -?"

"When we first got over there, Quigley was trying to break into the room," said Pansy.

"Had his fucking sister with him," said Theo. "She kept bloody crying, begging him to get her *beloved* master away from the evil Mudblood." He rolled his eyes. "Fucking cunt."

Pansy gasped.

"THEO!" snapped Hermione. "You should *never* use such language towards a woman!"

"She's not a fucking woman," he spat. "She's a selfish cunt."

Draco smirked as the girls gasped again.

"*Anyways,*" said Ron, for once being the sensible one and trying to get them back on track. "Quigley bailed when Theo's father and Dolohov showed up. They tried to break in too, but when they couldn't, they went off to find Bellatrix to see if she could get past her husband's shields."

They all looked at Rodolphus.

"Then *we* tried," continued Ron. "But, when we couldn't get in either, we walked around the outside of the room to see if we could find any hidden passageways that led inside. When we came back, the door just opened and they were gone. So we came here."

"But we passed Quincy and Dolohov in one of the corridors," said Pansy. "They were on their way back. I'm sure they've already figured out that -"

Suddenly, they all went silent, their ears perking up as they heard several voices coming down the corridor outside of the door.

"Right on cue," said Draco. "Roddy, get over here."

Rodolphus hurried over and they all pressed against the wall, Ron and Theo each taking a corner of the invisibility cloak and holding it up. Draco adjusted it to cover their feet before heading to the closest table and sitting down at it.

Bellatrix stormed into the room not even three seconds later. She sighed in relief when she saw him, but did her best to hide it from the others.

"Search the room," she ordered.

Several Death Eaters ran into the room and began looking around. But they were not being especially thorough, and no one even approached the wall where five people were hiding behind an invisibility cloak. Because normal invisibility cloaks would not work in this room, so why bother? But if any of these Death Eaters were just an inch or two taller, they could surely see the tops of all of their heads.

"There is nothing, Mistress," one of them reported.

"Good," she answered, motioning for all of them to leave.

"Is there trouble, Auntie?" Draco asked innocently.

Bellatrix sneered at him before slamming the door behind her. "Search *every* corridor!" she shouted from the other side. "I will have one of your heads for every ten minutes we do not find them!"

There was the shuffling of many feet heading in every which direction. Then it was silent.

Theo and Ron lowered the cloak.

"We need to get fucking going," said Draco, jumping off of the table. "Weasel, obviously I'm not going to be in there with you when you do it now. Are you still up for it?"

Ron grabbed the sword back from Theo. He looked at Draco and nodded confidently. "I didn't volunteer for this to back out now."

Hermione looked down at the sword, her body going numb as she suddenly realized why Ron was actually here. "No," she said. "Ron, you … you can't! That's suicide!"

Ron frowned and shrugged. "So? It has to be done. Harry can't win unless I -"

"Then we'll stay!" she shouted. "We'll stay and help you -"

"You two *can't* fucking stay," said Theo. "You're who the Dark Lord wants. And if they're all distracted looking for you then Weasel has a better chance to -"

"NO!" Hermione could feel her heart in her throat as the back of her eyes stung with tears. "I just got you back, Ronald Weasley! I will *not* let you do this! Not alone!"

Theo and Pansy looked at each other. They nodded in agreement.

"We'll be there," said Theo. "Pansy and I will get Bronson and Blaise out while Weasel finds the Dark Lord. Then we'll go back."

Hermione shook her head. "No. That won't work. How will you even keep in contact?"

Suddenly, Ron stared down at her wrist. He stepped forward and pulled her bracelet off of her. The one she had made with the Protean Charm when they had sneaked into Hogwarts.

"I still have mine too," he said, lifting his arm to show her. He slipped the bracelet onto Pansy. "When it burns hot, that's me telling you a location. It will be written on the charm."

Pansy nodded. "Got it."

"Hold on," said Draco. "There is still one huge flaw in this hole-infested plan."

They all looked at him expectantly.

"Hermione and I don't have fucking wands!"

Hermione cast her eyes to the floor and blushed. "I have a wand." She pulled it out of her pocket.

Ron looked at it and blinked. "Hey, isn't that your old wand? The one the Snatchers took?"

Hermione nodded.

Draco pursed his eyebrows as he stared at her. Then he looked at Rodolphus. "What are you fucking playing at, Roddy?"

"I believe I have made my feelings perfectly clear," he answered, never once taking his sad eyes off of Hermione. But she would not even look at him. He sighed and reached into his pocket, pulling out his wand.

Ron, Theo and Pansy all grabbed theirs and aimed at him.

"They're useless in this room, remember?" said Hermione, finally lifting her head.

She watched closely as Rodolphus held his wand out to Draco. Draco looked at it skeptically.

"What are you play -?"

"I am not '*playing*' at anything, Malfoy," said Rodolphus. "Just take it before I change my mind."

Draco slowly reached his hand for the wand, then quickly snatched it, tucking it away in his own pocket before Rodolphus could try and take it back. He looked at Theo and the two of them silently agreed not to mention that Theo had an extra. If Rodolphus suddenly changed his mind about helping them … well, helping Hermione, then they would want him unarmed.

"So how are you going to get out with the Death Eaters searching for you everywhere?" asked Ron.

Draco and Hermione looked at each other, both scrunching up their faces in thought.

"I can create a temporary distraction," offered Rodolphus.

Everyone in that room moved their eyes to him. He was still very focused on Hermione.

"Why?" Draco asked again.

"You ask that too much," answered Rodolphus.

"I just don't understand you," said Draco. "Maybe you want to get Hermione out, but you don't give two shits about me, so why bring her here? Why help us?"

"She would not leave without you."

"Then you could have knocked her the fuck out and taken her somewhere!" shouted Draco. "She didn't have a wand! So why *the fuck* are you doing this?"

Rodolphus continued to stare at Hermione. She fidgeted nervously, twitching her foot and picking at her fingers, before finally looking at him and meeting his gaze. Her throat went dry as she noticed something behind his eyes that had always been so clouded by lust. But this was not lust, it truly was something more.

"I could not care less about your cause or other Mudbloods," said Rodolphus. "But I want her … Hermione to be happy." Finally tearing his eyes off of her, he looked at Draco. "And you seem to be the only one capable of making that happen."

Without another word, Rodolphus headed for the door.

"But …" Hermione stopped and took a deep breath. She was not sure why she suddenly felt a softness for this man, and she sort of hated herself for it, but she did and she could not ignore it. "You don't have a wand."

"I won't need one for what I have planned," said Rodolphus, looking back at her with his hand on the knob. "I will be heading towards the front of the castle, near the Astronomy Tower. I suggest you find a way out in the opposite direction."

Rodolphus opened the door and the two guards he had Imperiused stepped aside. He moved into the hall, turned back and locked eyes with Hermione.

"This will be the last time we ever see each other, my precious Mudblood."

Now able to use magic, Rodolphus held out his hand and summoned her to him. Draco, Ron, Theo and Pansy all ran after her, but she was already in his arms before any of them could reach her.

Rodolphus used his free hand to stroke her cheek. He went in to kiss her lips, but stopped at the last moment, letting out a soft sigh before pressing his lips to just below her right eye instead. He let her go at the same moment Draco yanked her from his arms.

Rodolphus turned away quickly and headed down the corridor, refusing to look back. Because, he knew if he did, that he would not have the strength to do what he was about to do. It may have taken him until now, but he finally realized that he needed to let her go. To give her that chance to live a normal life, without the people who brought her such painful memories around to haunt her. Like him.

Ron put the invisibility cloak back on, leaving only his head poking out.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Hermione as he stepped towards the door.

"Yes," he answered. "This is the only way we can finish this, Hermione."

She nodded. The two of them embraced, squeezing each other tight and crying as they forced themselves to let go.

"Remember to pay attention to the bracelet," said Ron, looking at Pansy.

"I will," she said, rubbing her hand against it.

Ron took one last look at Hermione, gulping as he put on his hood and ran off in search of Voldemort.

"We'll get Bronson and Blaise into one of the hidden passageways," said Theo, "then we'll head back. Just to warn you, the Dark Lord setup an alarm to go off the moment either of you leave this place, so move quickly."

"Right," said Draco, looking at him. "Be careful, mate. Don't …" he sighed. "Just don't fucking die, all right?"

Theo smirked. "What's with the sentimental crap? My disloyalty is still hidden. *You* don't fucking die."

Draco smirked back. "I'll try not to."

The two of them shared a nod, the closest they would ever get to a hug. But Hermione was not too macho. She happily stepped forward and threw her arms around Theo. "Be safe," she said. Then she looked at Pansy. "Both of you."

"Don't forget, if you see Astoria, get her out with you," said Pansy. "From what I've witnessed, she should come easily."

Draco and Hermione nodded.

"We will see you on the outside," said Draco, taking Hermione's hand.

The four of them left the room, running off in opposite directions, all of their hearts heavy as they realized the truth. This might be it. The last moment they ever saw each other. But they were going to try. After all, the real battle had yet to come.

XXX

Everything was a blur as Rodolphus moved through the corridors of Hogwarts. He vaguely felt himself checking to make sure each hall was clear before turning the corner, but he had little recollection of it once it was done. The entire castle was

trapped in a thick fog, both pushing him back and urging him forward as he pictured her face. His Mudblood. Hermione. The only woman he had ever loved. Someone he was supposed to hate. But he did not hate her, not even a little bit.

Rodolphus had always been taught that Muggle-borns were inferior, but Hermione … if anything, she was *superior*. Not only was she the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but she was smart, her magic unmatched, and her soul … it was the strongest he had ever encountered.

As Rodolphus reached the front of the castle, his feet stopped on their own. There were voices. He looked around the corner. His slave's brother was there, arguing with Bellatrix about something. Probably the release of his friend now that Draco had arrived. While this had been promised to him, Rodolphus knew that his wife had a certain itch every time she looked at the Mudblood man, and she really wanted him to scratch it. To be her pet. And she would not be giving him his freedom so easily.

If the brother was here, then Rodolphus knew that his slave must be close. He looked around and finally found her sitting on the stairway leading up to the Astronomy Tower. Perfect. Now, if he could just get past his wife, this girl would surely alert everyone to his arrival. Giving him a good head start.

With his wife's back to him, Rodolphus hurried across the hall. The slave looked up as he approached.

"Mast -"

He shoved past her and hurried up the stairs.

"Master, wait!" she shouted after him.

It was only a matter of seconds before Bellatrix was calling his name. "Rodolphus, you get back here!" she screamed.

Footsteps could be heard approaching and she began barking orders.

"Master, where are you going?"

Someone grabbed Rodolphus's arm and he was forced to turn, staring into the very wrong eyes of his slave. This was not the face he wanted to see. "Get out of here."

"W-what? Master, I -"

"Get out of here," he repeated, "and never look back."

"Fiona!"

Rodolphus turned forward again as her brother rounded the corner. More footsteps were approaching behind him.

Bellatrix caught sight of his back and tried to shoot a Stunning Spell at him, but with the spiral staircase, she was unable to aim properly before he disappeared again.

"Rodolphus, stop!" she ordered.

But Rodolphus did not listen. His ears clouded as he tried hard to focus on a face. Hermione's face. He envisioned her as he always had. Lovely and smiling, looking at him affectionately as she lay beneath him in his bed. The look of a woman in love.

A spell shot at him and blasted the stone just beside his left ear.

But then Hermione's face began to change. She was still lying there, looking up at him, but her eyes were now fearful. Wet and pained as horrible bruises marked her once flawless skin.

"No," she cried as he envisioned himself moving on top of her.

And then Rodolphus remembered something else. He was standing in a corner, watching as her current owner, Quincy, took what he wanted from her, promising Rodolphus a turn as soon as he was finished.

"Please, no! Stop! STOP!"

"Shut it, Mudblood!"

Quincy smacked her hard, casting a spell to bind her wrists so tight they bled.

"DON'T! PLEASE! No more! I beg of you!"

"I said shut it!"

A wand was raised and the Cruciatus Curse ran through Hermione, making her scream louder as Quincy continued to force her brutally.

Rodolphus moved closer. He had not at the time, but now he zoomed in, looking at

her beaten face. Her cheeks were wet, her nose bloody and her eyes black. She continued to cry as Quincy had his way with her.

Rodolphus suddenly could not breathe.

*This* was the reality. The image of her he had never let himself see. Because the lie was so much easier than the truth. He had let them hurt her. *He* had hurt her. For years, she had gone through hell, and he had done nothing to stop it.

Hermione. His beautiful Hermione. Beaten. Bruised. Bloody. Sobbing. Aching. Pained. Shattered. Broken. Bloody. Terrified. Scarred. Pleading. BLOODY.

It was these images that were flooding through Rodolphus's mind as he reached the top of the tower. It was the fear he had missed in her amber eyes that haunted him as he walked towards the edge. It was the love she emitted when she looked at Draco that pushed him to step onto the ledge and let himself plummet towards the ground.

Rodolphus closed his eyes as the cool, morning air rushed against his cheeks.

And it was here that he saw her smiling again. Happy and beautiful in a world where she was considered an equal, no longer haunted by the horrors she had endured by his hand. This was the image he held onto. The last thing he saw before there was nothing.

A horrible scream shot through the air as Rodolphus hit the ground.

"NO! MASTER!"

"Fiona, stop! Calm down!" Quigley held Fiona back as she tried desperately to look over the edge.

Bellatrix stood frozen a few feet to their left. There were several Death Eaters standing behind her, and no one looked like they knew what they were supposed to do.

"That bitch …" Bellatrix said quietly. "That bitch Imperiused him to do this!" She turned around and faced her Death Eaters. "FIND HER! And someone get down to the dungeons and kill the prisoners! Everyone she has ever cared about will suffer for this!"

"What?" shouted Quigley. "No!"

His arms loosened around Fiona for only a moment, but it was enough for the

hysterical girl to break free. She ran forward, looking over the edge until she found Rodolphus's broken body, a pool of blood staining the snow around him as he lay so very still. Her heart broke in that moment.

"Fiona!"

Before Fiona knew what she was doing, she crawled onto the ledge, her eyes still focused on Rodolphus as she let herself fall.

"FIONA!"

Quigley grabbed for his sister, but she had moved too fast. His fingers barely grazed the cloth of her dress as she fell downward.

"NO!"

He nearly fell over the edge himself as he tried to reach her, his hands frantic as she fell further and further away from him.

"FIONA!" he cried. It was only a moment. Not even enough time to take out his wand and try to levitate her before she hit the ground, her own blood spreading through the snow on both sides of her, creating two small, angel wings. An image that would forever haunt Quigley's mind.

"NO, NO, NO!" he screamed, still hanging over the edge. He did not know what he was supposed to do. His little sister … his family. He had given up everything … *everything* to save her. And now, in the blink of an eye, she was gone. Gone.

Quigley stumbled back, his hands held over his mouth as he stared into the distance in disbelief.

"And what of him, Mistress?"

He turned to see Bellatrix and several of the Death Eaters still standing there.

Bellatrix gazed at him, her heavily-lidded eyes narrowed and cold as her mouth twisted in disgust. "Leave him be. Life will be a far worse punishment for him than death."

The Death Eaters nodded and ran down the stairs.

Bellatrix stayed a moment longer, her eyes angry as she looked past him and to the edge of the tower, knowing very well that her husband was just beyond it. Dead.

Bellatrix turned away and hurried down the stairs. She let one single tear fall down her cheek before wiping it away. Sometimes, you never truly realized you cared for someone until they jumped off of a tower right in front of you.

XXX

Bronson was lying down in his cell, staring mindlessly at the ceiling when he heard the door to their lovely dungeon open.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Execution or rescue mission?"

"I don't care," answered Blaise, who was leaning against the wall in his own cell. "Without Daphne, an execution seems more liberating than being rescued."

"You better hope she's not listening to you say that shit," said Bronson. "I'm pretty sure she would beat the crap out of you."

Someone stepped off of the stairs and they both looked to see Pansy. Bronson immediately sat up but Blaise stayed sulking.

"We have to hurry!" she said, running over to Bronson's cell first and unlocking it. "Draco and Granger are trying to get out of the castle, and Death Eaters are swarming everywhere. We only have minutes to get you the fuck out of here before they notice."

Bronson stepped out of his cell, but Blaise still did not move.

"Get up!" shouted Pansy.

"Pan-sy."

The voice took Pansy by surprised. She looked over at the very last cell and saw her father standing there. Watching her. Her heart stopped. She slowly stepped towards him.

"Pansy, what's taking so fucking long?" shouted a voice coming down the stairs. "The mental students have finally noticed that the other ones are missing and they're fucking running everywhere trying to find them!"

Theo stepped into the dungeon and, suddenly, Blaise came alive.

"YOU FUCKING BASTARD!"

Blaise was out of his cell in a flash and hurling himself at Theo. They both fell to

the ground, Theo struggling as Blaise proceeded to strangle the life out of him.

"Fuck you, Theo! FUCK YOU!"

"Get off of him!" shouted Bronson, trying to pull Blaise away. But the wizard was determined. He kept his grip and Theo began to turn blue.

"Pa - Pan -"

"*Cogita*!"

Pansy ran forward with the mirror clutched in her hands.

"Blaise, stop! Stop! Daphne's alive! She's alive!"

"Don't you fucking lie -"

"I'm not!" shouted Pansy. "See?"

She held out the mirror, showing him Daphne standing on the other side of it.

"Blaise, stop strangling Theo!" demanded Daphne.

Blaise's heart sped up. His hands dropped from Theo's neck and grabbed the mirror.

"Daphne," he said in disbelief.

Daphne smiled. "Yes, baby, it's me. Theo didn't kill me, okay? He just made it look like he did and then he got me out. Look who I'm with!" She moved the mirror over to show him Harry. "Say hi, Potter."

"Uh … hi," said Harry. "What's going on in there? Are Ron and Hermione -?"

"No one's dead yet," said Pansy, poking her head into view. "Draco and Granger are on their way out now."

"Baby, you need to get out of there," said Daphne, putting the mirror back on her. "We're in the forest right now but we're slowly approaching the castle. Get out and we'll find you. Understand?"

Blaise nodded, tears filling his eyes as he gazed at the woman he loved.

"I'll see you soon."

"Okay," he said. "Baby, I love you."

"I love you too," she said with a smile. "Be careful."

Blaise nodded again. With a heavy heart, he touched the mirror and watched her face vanish.

Theo was still coughing and gasping for air on the floor. Bruises in the shape of fingerprints were already forming. Pansy kneeled down and cast a Healing Spell.

As soon as Theo could breathe again, he looked at Blaise and shouted, "FUCKER!" He gave him a hard shove. "How the fuck could you believe I would ever kill Daphne!"

"Sorry," said Blaise, unsure of what else he could say in that moment. "But you put on a pretty convincing show."

Theo stumbled to his feet. "It's called fucking survival mode."

"You remember everything?"

Theo looked over to see Bronson standing a few steps back. He suddenly found himself blushing. "Yeah, I do."

"Since when?"

Theo bit his cheek.

"He's remembered the whole fucking time!" answered Pansy.

Theo blushed brighter.

Bronson took a step forward. "So … when you tortured me?"

"Yeah … I … sorry about that," said Theo, refusing to look him in the eye. "But I had to be convincing. The Dark Lord only ordered me to do it to see if I'd crack. But I didn't do it very hard!" He finally looked up at him. "And when he told me to make it stronger, I didn't! I was hoping you would notice and fake it or something, but you just looked like you were trying to fight it."

Bronson blinked.

"Well … say fucking something!"

Bronson said nothing.

Theo turned an even brighter shade of red. "Look, I'm sorry, all right? I never wanted to hurt you! That's why I tried to stay away! But you are the most persistent fucking person I have ever -"

Theo did not get the chance to finish before Bronson filled those last few steps between them, cupped his face in his hands and kissed him. Theo resisted for only a moment, his feet stumbling on the ground, before he finally gave in and let himself sink into it.

Blaise's jaw dropped to the floor. He slowly turned his head towards Pansy, who was too busy cooing at the sight in front of her to notice.

When the kiss ended, Bronson continued to hold Theo close, brushing his lips against the other man's just once more before finally letting him go.

"Promise me you'll consider going into acting when this is all over," said Bronson with a smile.

It took Theo a moment, but he eventually smiled back. "Yeah, that's not really my thing." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his extra wand. "We only have one, and I vote to let the fucker who choked me go unarmed."

Theo turned to look at Blaise. His head jerked back when he found both him and Pansy smiling quite creepily at him.

"How I've missed that vulgar language of yours," said Bronson, giving his new wand a few waves before kissing Theo again. "Should we get going then?"

Bronson took Theo's hand and pulled him towards the stairs.

As Theo passed Blaise, he narrowed his eyes and said, "Don't you fucking say anything."

"Wasn't gonna," said Blaise, finally releasing the chuckle he had been holding on to.

He followed them towards the stairs, but Pansy stayed where she was. She looked over her shoulder at her father, who was still watching her closely.

With a groan, she ran down the prison and unlocked his cell. "This is the last thing I'm *ever* going to do for you," she said as she pulled it open.

Without looking back, Pansy ran towards the stairs, following Bronson, Theo and Blaise up.

Bronson poked his head out the door, looking around to make sure the coast was clear before exiting. Theo immediately took the lead. Bronson smiled as he realized Theo was not even trying to shake off his hand. He was holding on. Oh, his cute, little, straight Death Eater. How he had missed him.

They only took a few twists and turns through the corridors before Theo was stopping in front of a statue of some former Dark Arts professor. He glanced in both directions before pulling its head. The statue moved to reveal a hidden passage behind it.

"Where does this go?" asked Bronson, staring into the dark abyss.

"The courtyard," answered Theo.

Blaise stepped inside. Bronson followed, whipping around the moment he felt Theo's hand leave his. Theo was already grabbing back onto the statue's head.

"Hold on," said Bronson, stepping into the entrance so if Theo pulled that head it would crush him. "You two aren't coming with us?"

"We're not the ones who are fucking wanted," answered Theo. "And, besides, we have things to do."

"*Things*," repeated Bronson. "What *things*?"

"Well, to make sure Weasel doesn't bloody kill himself, for one," said Pansy. "Daphne wants us to find Astoria, if we can. And Draco and Granger aren't out yet. The Dark Lord set up an alarm to trigger the moment either of them exit the castle before Draco even got here. And it hasn't gone off yet."

"Like I said," exclaimed Theo. "*Things*. If they catch you two wandering around then they'll either kill you on the spot or use you to lure them back out. Draco might just call it a loss but we all know Granger will drag him the fuck back for you."

Voices could be heard from a nearby corridor. Both Theo and Pansy turned their heads in a panic.

Theo looked back at Bronson and sternly said, "Just go. We *will* see you on the outside."

Bronson took a small step back. He did not take his eyes off of Theo as the doorway closed, his heart already feeling the distance growing between them.

He and Blaise were left standing in the dark. Several footsteps approached. Pansy

and Theo took orders from whoever was there before running off.

"We're not going anywhere … are we?" asked Blaise from behind him.

"I'm not," answered Bronson. "But you don't have a wand. And I know your wife is waiting for you on the outside."

Blaise groaned. "Yeah, but she'd kill me if I showed up alone. At least if I stay there's a small chance of survival."

"She does seem like a ball buster."

"So are you and Theo like … boyfriends or something?"

Bronson smirked. "Not yet. But I'm wearing him down." He looked at Blaise and winked. Then he listened closely, and once he confirmed the area outside of their hiding place was clear, he lifted his wand and reopened the entryway.

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Theo and Pansy hurried through the corridors, trying to seem like they were actually searching for Draco and Hermione.

"Is it burning yet?" asked Theo.

Pansy shook her head. "No." She gulped nervously. "Do you really think Weasel can pull this off?"

"He better fucking be able to. If not then we might as well start mentally preparing for our executions now, because they will be imminent."

There was a loud clatter and they both watched as over a dozen Death Eaters and Snatchers headed down their corridor. Astoria was at the end of the group, her face going pale as she caught sight of them.

"You need to be the one to grab her," Theo whispered to Pansy. "She thinks I killed her sister, she won't talk to me."

Pansy nodded.

The approaching people surrounded Theo and Pansy, forcing them to step to opposite sides of the corridor. Theo was so busy watching Astoria that he did not notice the hand come out of nowhere and grab Pansy, pulling her away from him.

He stepped in front of Astoria just as she was about to pass him. She looked down to the floor and tried to step aside, but he just moved with her.

"Please, get out of my way, Theo."

"Hold on. I …"

It was only then that he realized Pansy was no longer with him. He started looking around frantically.

"What are you doing?" asked Astoria.

"Did you see where Pansy went?" he asked.

"No." She tried to push past him, but he grabbed her arm. "Don't touch me!" she spat.

"But I need to talk to you about something and -"

"Well, *I* don't want to hear it."

Astoria yanked her arm away and walked on. Theo debated going after her. Stunning her and locking her in a closet or something until he could find Pansy and have her call Daphne with the mirror, but if she was found before he got back to her then he would be in one hell of a mess. And, right now, he needed to find Pansy.

"Pansy!" he whispered harshly through the corridor, but she was not there. "Dammit!"

On instinct, Theo chose the side corridor she was closest to the last time he saw her and headed down it.

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If it was not for the long blond hair, Pansy would have had no idea who grabbed her until she was tossed into a classroom, and he turned to face her.

"Where have you been?" Lucius drawled as he stared at her with angry eyes.

"Around," she answered, rubbing at the wrist he had hurt.

"Rodolphus is dead," he said.

Pansy went stiff.

"They say he was Imperiused. And now we have just discovered that Draco *and* the prisoners have gone missing." Lucius took a few steps closer. He seemed to tower above her, but Pansy would not recoil. She kept his firm gaze with her own, trying hard to be brave. "Do you know anything about this?"

Pansy gave him a soft smile and shrugged.

Lucius went red. "Listen here, *girl*, my son is wandering around somewhere and we need to find him before the Dark Lord does. Understand?"

Pansy stood up straighter and asked, "What about Granger?"

"What about her?"

She sneered at him. "Don't play dumb with me, Lucius. I *know* what memory Draco was shown in the Great Hall. My father told me a long time ago about what you did. Do you feel no guilt?"

Lucius closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I did what I had to do to ensure my son's survival."

"Yes, and I'm sure he just *loved* witnessing his father take the girl he's in love with's virginity to save his life. *That* wouldn't be damaging or anything." Pansy rolled her eyes.

"He already knew," said Lucius. "He called me a rapist before."

"By his reaction, I would say he was not aware that you were the first," she said.

"It's not important. What we need to focus on now is getting Draco out and -"

"Lucius, no!" Pansy said sternly. "I am already involved in a plan to get Draco *and* Granger out, and you aren't part of it!" She tried to head for the door but he pulled her back.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"It means Draco and Granger are already on their way out, and *I* am the one who set the prisoners free!"

Lucius's grip tightened. "You stupid, stupid girl!"

"No, you're stupid!" she spat. "Your son, who you *claim* to love, came back here to save Granger and you don't even care! Maybe because you can't even look at

yourself in the mirror when you think about what you did to her, about the horrible fate you condemned her with, but *this* is not about you! It is about Draco and Granger, and the two of them wanting to be together! It's about them wanting a future!"

Lucius shook his head. "No. Draco is infatuated with her. Nothing more. It will pass and -"

"No!" shouted Pansy. "He wants to marry her!"

"No he doesn't. He -"

"Yes. He. Does."

Suddenly remembering something, Pansy reached into her pocket and grabbed the ring she had forgotten to give back to Hermione.

"You see this?" she said. "*This* is an engagement ring! I pulled it off of Granger when I locked her in the dungeon. I didn't want Bellatrix or anyone else to see before Draco got here. He is *going* to marry her."

Lucius shook his head again. "No. No, he … he can't."

"Why not? Because it doesn't fit in with *your* plan?" she asked. "So tell me something, Lucius? Why is it you don't want to help Granger get out too? Is it just because of the guilt? Because you can't bear the thought of someone whose life you ruined ending up with your son? Or is it simply because she's a Mudblood?"

Lucius said nothing. His eyes dropped to the floor as he slowly released his grip on her arm.

Pansy huffed. She shoved the ring into his hand. "You disgust me. Out of all people, you should have learned years ago to put your prejudices aside. Granger didn't deserve what she got."

"I … I know," said Lucius. "That's not it. I don't care that she's a …" He sighed. "… a Muggle-born."

"Then it's the guilt?" asked Pansy.

Lucius did not answer.

"You truly are a selfish human being, if one could even call you that." She headed for the door. "Goodbye, Lucius."

Lucius was left standing there, the ring still in his hand and burning a hole right through him. He looked down, knowing instantly that the chain it was attached to was Narcissa's. Together they were a piece of the only two women his son had ever loved. Tears fell from his eyes as his hand clasped around the ring and, for the first time, he truly realized how wrong he had been. About everything.

In the corridor, Pansy immediately headed back to where she had last been with Theo, but he was long gone by now. She looked around, but he was nowhere.

"Shit!"

Right at that moment, her wrist started to burn. She lifted it and looked at the bracelet.

*Headmaster's office.*

"Well, double shit!"

Pansy glanced around frantically. Theo could be halfway across the castle by now, and there was no time to look for him.

With a deep breath, she started marching down the corridor, headed for the Headmaster's office. She did not want to do this alone, but she knew she had to. Without help, Ron would be killed, and she could not handle even one more death on her conscience. It was time to finish this, starting with destroying something she had only just heard about a few hours ago. That bloody ring the Dark Lord always wore on his pinky finger. The Horcrux.

# Chapter 47: Come Together

**A/N: So yeah … it would be a pretty good assumption to say this story will not be finished in September. Sorry. I hurt my neck two weeks ago and it has been a bit of a struggle to write without agitating it. Even now I have it iced. :o/**

**Oh well … October it is! Three more chapters! Yay! War, war, war! Let's make this happen!**

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Draco and Hermione moved through the halls of Hogwarts, trying to take as many hidden passageways as they could, so they would be less inclined to run into Death Eaters and Snatchers. Unfortunately, these passages were where the majority of the Dementors were lurking, since the rest of the castle was shining with the light of day.

Draco was afraid he might be overusing his Dark Mark. The more he touched the lit tip of his wand to it, the longer it took for a Dementor to react. They were starting to recognize something as being off, and that was not good.

"Maybe we should try lifting the shield that prevents Patronuses," suggested Hermione.

"There is no way we could do that without the Dark Lord noticing."

Hermione crinkled her nose.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing. You were just getting so good at saying You-Know-Who."

Draco smirked. "Sorry, love. Old habits."

The two of them reached the end of the passageway they were in. Draco was about to pull back the tapestry they were hidden behind when he heard several footsteps approaching. He stopped and listened.

"Did you hear about Lestrange? Walked right off the bloody tower, he did."

Draco felt Hermione's hand tense in his.

"*Really*? Why would he do that?"

"His wife says he was Imperiused, but dunno how the Mudblood woulda done it

without a wand. I think he just cracked. Let her go and offed himself." The person chuckled. "Best part is, that slave o' his jumped right after him."

"The one that just got freed?"

"Yeah. She did it right in front o' her Mudblood brother. It was a riot!"

Their voices trailed off as they continued down the corridor.

Draco looked at Hermione, his eyes well enough adjusted to the dark to see she was staring off vacantly, her breathing slightly heavy as she continued to listen to them.

"You all right?" asked Draco once they were gone.

Hermione nodded, but she did not look at him.

"Mind if I ask who it is you feel sorry for? Rodolphus or Fiona?"

She shrugged. "Both. And Quigley. I know we're supposed to hate him for betraying us but I … I just don't, Draco. He's told me stories about Fiona before, when they were younger. She seemed … normal. Fun even. He loved her more than anything. It's just … it's so terrible."

Draco nodded. "And Rodolphus?"

Hermione took a deep breath. "I don't know." A tear dripped down her cheek. "I didn't realize it before, but I think I have a mild case of Stockholm syndrome."

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"It's a Muggle term," she said. "For victims who sympathize with their captors. Because I … I don't hate him either, but I hate myself for feeling *anything* for him. I *should* hate him. I *want* to hate him. Even when he told me we would never see each other again, I knew he was going to do this. I didn't stop him, and I feel *terrible* about that. Why do I feel terrible, Draco?"

Draco frowned. He lifted his hand and wiped below her wet eyes with his thumb. "Because you're a nice person who is incapable of hatred. Pure hatred, at least. It's a good thing. Much better than being a cynic, like me."

"It's not fair," she said. "I deserve to feel hatred properly."

Draco smirked. "Properly?"

"Yes."

"Maybe just focus on the Dark Lord," he said. "I am sure anyone is capable of feeling hatred for *him* properly." He winked.

Hermione chuckled.

"Pansy!"

Draco and Hermione both stopped and listened. Someone was whispering harshly in the corridor outside of their hiding place. They looked at each other and Draco mouthed, "Theo?"

Hermione nodded.

Draco pulled the tapestry aside and looked down the corridor. Theo was about two steps away with his back to him.

"Lose something, Theo?"

Theo whipped around and aimed his wand. His face was panicked but he successfully held back a scream.

"Th'fuck, Draco! Why are you two still over here?"

"We're having a bit of trouble getting anywhere," said Hermione, poking her head out.

"Where's Pansy?" asked Draco.

Theo shrugged. "I don't know. She just fucking vanished on me when we got separated in a crowd. I've looked everywhere."

"If you can't find her then find the Dark Lord," said Draco. "She's going to have one hell of a time protecting Weasel on her own."

"Yeah, I know," said Theo, sounding exasperated, "but everyone I've come across doesn't know where he is. He's probably wandering around looking for you."

"He's not."

All three of them lifted their wands and aimed at the voice in record time. Goyle was standing a few feet away. He held his hands above his hand and dropped his wand.

"What are you doing?" spat Draco. "Pick it up!"

Goyle shook his head. "I don't want to do this anymore."

"Do what?" asked Theo.

"Be a Death Eater," said Goyle. He gulped. "Kill people."

Hermione's wand hand was the only one that eased. "Draco, he's unarmed," she said.

"So?" said Draco. "Who's to say this is even Goyle? I've certainly never seen any signs that he wanted out."

Draco noticed Theo flinch a little out of the corner of his eye.

"You have something to say, Theo?"

Theo crinkled his forehead. "Well … I have a vague recollection of him saying something along those lines the night he, Astoria and I all drank together."

"You mean the night you shagged her?"

Theo's jaw dropped. "Hey!" He scowled at Draco. "I've said it before and I'll say it again. Drunken mis-take."

"Is that really what's important right now?" said Hermione, pursing her eyebrows. "Draco, why don't you just use Legilimency and check him out."

"All right," Draco whined. He stepped forward and put his wand to Goyle's forehead. "*Legilimens*!"

While he was occupied, Hermione looked at Theo and smiled. "So did you have your reunion with Bronson, Theo?"

"Uh … yeah," he said, blushing slightly.

"And how did it go?"

"Fine."

"Just fine?"

Theo blushed brighter. "Not sure what you want me to say, Granger. He forgave me for lying."

"And …"

"Stop hassling him, Hermione, you already know they fucking snogged," said Draco, walking back over.

Hermione giggled as Theo turned even redder.

Draco, however, was still focused on Goyle. "He's legit. Pick up your wand, Goyle."

Goyle did just that. He glanced around before leaning in and whispering, "I know where the Dark Lord is. I saw Bellatrix head into the Headmaster's office shortly after Rodolphus snuffed it. He yelled at her to bring Draco and the Mudblood to him. I don't think he was going anywhere."

Draco and Theo looked at each other. They both nodded.

"You really want out?" asked Draco, moving his gaze back to Goyle.

Goyle nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"Then find Astoria, take her outside and head for the forest. You'll be bombarded there, but tell them I sent you and they'll at least let you live until I arrive. Understand?"

He nodded again.

"Theo, get to the Headmaster's office," ordered Draco. "Hermione and I will …"

They all froze. There were footsteps approaching. Draco grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her through the corridor. A little ways down, he moved a portrait aside and helped her step into the passageway behind it before following after.

"Those things are bloody everywhere," said Goyle.

"What are you two doing just standing here?" demanded Quincy as he turned onto the corridor with two Snatchers walking faithfully behind him. "Get out there and fucking find the prisoners!" He stopped and stared at his son. "You especially, Theo. You, more than anyone, have something to prove here."

Theo crinkled his brow and said, "What? What do I have to prove, Father?"

"Where your loyalty lies," said Quincy.

"It lies exactly where it ought to," Theo said vaguely. He stormed off. The moment he turned the corner, he took off running. Chances were, Pansy was on her way to the Headmaster's office, if not there already, and he would be damned before he let either her or Ron die. Draco was not the only one who had something to prove by fighting for the resistance. Theo had done his own wrong over the years, and it was time he helped fix this shithole of a world they were currently living in. It was time for redemption.

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Pansy gulped as she approached the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the Headmaster's office.

"Pureblood," she said to it, knowing perfectly well that this was the password Bellatrix always used.

The gargoyle moved aside and Pansy stepped through. She did not feel Ron move beside her, so she assumed he was already inside. Her heart beat incredibly fast as she ascended the spiral staircase. It was completely silent up there, giving off an eerie ambiance. She did not like it.

Pansy stepped into the office. The Dark Lord was standing near the window, staring out at the forest. Did he suspect something was happening out there? If he did then he did not show it. He seemed completely calm.

Voldemort turned and looked at her.

"Sorry, my Lord," said Pansy. "I did not know you were up here."

She moved to leave out of habit, but was beyond relieved when he called her back. It would have been awkward to turn around on her own somehow.

"What is happening out there?" he asked.

Pansy shrugged. "I am not sure, my Lord. No one has told me anything, but I don't believe anyone has found them."

Voldemort suddenly looked angry. Pansy took a step back.

"And the prisoners?"

"I am told they have escaped, my Lord," she answered.

Suddenly, she felt something brush against her. Ron. She tried hard to fight off a

reaction. Luckily, the Dark Lord turned back towards the window and did not notice her distress.

"Theo?" Ron whispered in a voice so quiet she could barely be sure it was there. She moved her head side to side in the smallest of motions.

"Do you see something out there, my Lord?" she asked, walking towards Voldemort.

"No," he said, turning back to her. "Should I?"

Pansy shook her head. "You just seem very focused. I was not sure if the centaurs were out on their morning hunt or something."

"No. The forest is quiet this morning."

Hopefully not *too* quiet.

Voldemort turned away from the window and went over to the Headmaster's desk. He picked up a glass that was already filled with mead and took a sip. He motioned to the open bottle and, when Pansy nodded, he *Accio'd* over another glass and poured her some.

Pansy thanked him and took a sip, watching closely as he placed the palm of his left hand on the desk, the small emerald ring sparkling as it caught the faint candlelight emitting from the room. It certainly did not look like it had been tainted with the evilest of magic.

Pansy heard a small sound beside her, perhaps one of a sword leaving its holster. Voldemort looked in the direction of the sound but he did not say anything. His hand lifted off of the desk and went to his side.

"Do you believe Rodolphus was Imperiused?" he asked suddenly. "His *widow* seems fairly convinced that he was."

Pansy took another sip of her drink, then said, "No, my Lord. I believe Rodolphus was responsible for his own actions. The Mudblood may know wandless magic, but not enough to have Imperiused him. He was acting of his own accord."

"Yes, that is what I believe, as well." Voldemort glanced towards the window again. Without another word, he lifted his wand and pulled back his sleeve, revealing his own Dark Mark. It was different than those of his followers, slightly larger and, instead of curving downward, the snake curved above the skull's head like a crown.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Summoning Bellatrix. As much as I would love to see Draco torture and kill his Mudblood, it is time I gave the order to kill her on sight. As long as she is around to protect, he will not let his guard down. The Mudblood needs to die."

"I can give the order, my Lord," said Pansy, desperate to keep Bellatrix as far away from this room as possible. With just the Dark Lord present, at least she and Ron might be able to make a run for it. But if Bellatrix was here too … well, they might as well just call it a suicide mission and face imminent death right now.

"Tell me something, Pansy," said Voldemort in his raspy voice. "If I gave you an order to kill Draco, could you do it?"

Pansy was taken aback. "I … I'm sorry, my Lord, I don't understand. I thought you wanted Draco alive."

"The boy is more trouble than he is worth," he said. "As soon as he has done what was foretold, I have every intention of disposing of him. If you were the one I gave the order to, would you be able to do it?"

Pansy went white. "I …"

"That is what I thought." Voldemort touched the tip of his wand to his Dark Mark.

Pansy's heart stopped. She could not breathe. *Shit*. They needed to do this quickly. Before Bellatrix got here. But, first, they needed to get his hand on a flat surface.

Without another thought, Pansy reached out and grabbed the Dark Lord's left hand. She placed it flat on the desk with hers on top of it, then stared deeply into his snake-like, scarlet eyes and said, "I would do whatever you asked of me, my Lord."

While Voldemort continued to gaze at her, Pansy felt the air shift on her side. She put down her glass and slowly lifted her hand, locking her eyes with Voldemort's in an attempt to keep him still. His hand did not budge.

Then there was a glint. Pansy looked to her side and so did the Dark Lord. A streak of silver slashed through the air. Voldemort tried to move his hand, causing the sword to miss the ring but still chop off his pinky finger. He screamed out in agony while Pansy gasped. His finger vanished before their very eyes.

"My Lord! What -?"

"*Accio cloak*!" shouted Voldemort.

Pansy did not expect the spell to work. She had been told that the cloak Ron was wearing was a special cloak that did not normally respond to such spells. But she also knew that the Elder Wand the Dark Lord used was somehow connected to it. The explanation she and Theo had been given was brief, but they had been convinced that the wand and the cloak would not react to each other, which was why she was so surprised to see the Cloak of Invisibility go flying across the room and Ron left standing there, looking dumbfounded.

While the cloak should have been summoned into the Dark Lord's hand, the magic on it still must have been resisting enough to send it not very far in the opposite direction.

"*You*!" hissed Voldemort, raising his wand and pointing it at Ron.

In a moment of panic, Pansy shouted, "*Expelliarmus*!"

Voldemort's wand did not go a great distance, but it still flew from his hand and landed on the floor. His eyes shot over to Pansy, looking at her in what can only be described as disbelief. Then they narrowed, practically glowing scarlet as he moved to pick up his wand.

Ron darted for the invisibility cloak. When he reached it, he threw it back over his shoulders.

Pansy stood there frozen as Voldemort reached his wand, lifted it and shouted, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

She closed her eyes as the Killing Curse headed straight for her, but the force she felt hit her was much different than she expected. A hand cupped behind her head as she suddenly struck stone. When she opened her eyes again, she was not completely surprised to find Ron lying on top of her with the cloak veiled over both of their bodies. An awkward moment passed between them as they made eye contact, but before either of them could think too much about it, Voldemort shouted, "*Accio cloak*!" again.

It flew off of them and Ron wrapped his arms around Pansy, holding her close as he rolled both of them behind the desk before a Killing Curse could make contact.

Unfortunately, the ring slipped from Ron's hands as he struggled to hold onto her. The sword had already been dropped somewhere when he darted to save her.

"*Accio ring*!" shouted Pansy before Voldemort had a chance to even notice it was gone. It landed smoothly in her hand, but she was unaware that it was still very much attached to Voldemort's pinky finger. She screamed in disgust and dropped it.

Ron picked up the ring and yanked it free before tossing the finger aside.

Voldemort was marching around to the other side of the desk when he heard footsteps coming from the spiral staircase. Theo ran into view, and Voldemort stared at him with distrustful eyes.

Looking down, Theo noticed a sword lying at his feet. He picked it up.

"My Lord, what is -?"

Theo was unable to finish his question before an incredible blast sent him flying into the wall. The desk shot into the air and slammed against Voldemort. Pansy and Ron stood up from where they had been crouched and made a run for it.

"Sorry, Theo!" shouted Pansy, grabbing his hand and pulling him to his feet.

Voldemort was trapped between the desk and the wall, but his wand and hand were free. The three blood traitors were headed for the stairs and, while there was no time to kill them all, he could at least slow them down until he was on his feet again.

Ron was in the back, and Voldemort cast a successful Trip Jinx on his feet, sending him falling into Pansy and Theo. As they all stumbled, the ring fell out of Ron's hand. It began to roll down the spiral staircase.

"Shit! You haven't fucking destroyed it yet?" shouted Theo, pushing them off of him and running after it.

Ron and Pansy barely got out of the way as the desk came flying at them. They ran down the stairs two at a time, following Theo, who was still trying to stop the ring by poking the sword at it.

"Careful, Nott!" shouted Ron. "Horcruxes sometimes have a line of defense! It might try to attack you when you strike!"

"Guess we'll come to that road soon enough!" said Theo.

The ring hit the statue at the bottom of the stairwell and Theo raised the sword. Ron and Pansy were running too fast to slow down and crashed into him.

Suddenly, the gargoyle statue opened and all three of them stumbled through the entryway, Theo's foot accidentally kicking the ring away from them.

"What the …"

Ron and Pansy looked to see Bellatrix standing beside the gargoyle, but Theo kept running, his eyes steadily fixed on the ring.

He reached it the moment it stopped rolling, raised the sword with both hands and jammed it down on the harmless-looking ring of silver and emerald.

The moment the ring was pierced, a thick, black smoke began to ooze out of it. A horrible howl shot through the air, causing Theo to fall on his arse. Ron grabbed Pansy and put a protective shield around them while Voldemort, who had just reached the bottom of the stairs, grabbed Bellatrix and pulled her behind the gargoyle.

The smoke continued to grow, rising until it was stretched from floor to ceiling, morphing its shape until it took on that of a hideous dragon. Its eyes glowed yellow as it stared down at Theo. His whole body shook as he began to sweat profusely.

The smoke dragon let out an earthshattering roar. It descended towards Theo, mouth open, eyes glowing, teeth glinting …

Theo sat frozen, unable to move even as Pansy screamed his name. He could not even close his eyes as eminent death surely fell upon him. But it did not.

It should have been over. Theo should have died. The dragon was right there, mere inches from his face, but his ears were so clouded that he completely missed the spell that was cast. A cool breeze shot over his head and engulfed the dragon, freezing it in a block of ice.

"*Discutio*!"

The dragon shattered into a million tiny ice shards. Theo's mouth fell open as he watched the smoke inside of each one dissolve.

"Theo!"

A blurry figure moved in front of him. His eyes began to focus and he found a pair of muddy-green ones staring back at him.

"B-Bronson?"

"Yeah," said Bronson. "It's me. Are you all right?"

Theo tried to nod but, instead, found himself leaning forward and throwing his arms around Bronson's neck.

"Aw, Theo, you're hugging me! My therapy is working!"

"Th'fuck you doing here?" shouted Theo, though he made no attempt to let him go.

Bronson chuckled. "If you really thought I was just going to leave then we still have a lot of getting to know each other to do. We've been following that bitch around, hoping she would lead us to the Dark Lord. But you're much better."

"Well, isn't this touching," said Bellatrix, stepping out from behind the gargoyle.

On instinct, Blaise, who was standing close to Bronson and Theo, raised the wand he had stolen off of a Snatcher Bronson had killed and shot a blast at the gargoyle. It crumbled and blocked the entryway before Voldemort could walk out of it.

"I'm done with these games!" she shouted, aiming her wand at Pansy and Ron, who were mere feet away from her. "*Avada Ke* -"

"*Expelliarmus*!"

Bellatrix's wand flew out of her hands and into Goyle's, who had just stepped into the corridor. She looked at him with pursed eyebrows, unsure of what to make of this.

Goyle gulped. He looked at the new wand in his hand, took a deep breath, and snapped it. Everyone's jaws dropped. Theo let out a loud, "Ha!"

"How dare you, you filthy -"

A loud blast came from the other side of the broken gargoyle statue. The stone erupted in every direction. This was their cue to leave.

Bronson stood up and pulled Theo with him. Ron hurried forward and grabbed the sword, putting it back in its holster. They all took off running while Bellatrix stared after them, uncertain of what she was supposed to do without a wand. She managed to fire a few hexes at them, but nothing they could not easily deflect.

"Where's Astoria?" Theo asked Goyle as they all ran for their lives.

"I couldn't find her," he answered. "One of the Snatcher's said they thought she headed in this direction a while earlier, but all I found was you guys."

Theo grunted. "Well, shit!"

The six of them turned a few corners before Theo was pulling aside a tapestry and leading them all behind it.

"So what was that smoke dragon thing now?" asked Blaise as they moved quickly through the hidden passageway.

"Long story," answered Theo.

"You know, Nott," said Ron. "Horcruxes are known to defend themselves by showing people their deepest fears. Do you fear dragons?"

"What kind of fucking question is that?" spat Theo. "Did you not see the bloody thing? *Of course* I fear dragons! With their claws, and their teeth, and their spiky fucking tails! These things wander around the world eating people, and we cover it up, hiding them from the Muggle world! *Why*, Weasel? Why do we fucking do that?"

There was a split in the hidden corridor where they could either continue straight or head down a narrow staircase. Theo pointed down and Blaise, who was in the lead, started descending the dark steps.

"So your deepest fear is a dragon? Not seeing your loved ones die or your father actually aiming a wand and trying to kill you?" asked Bronson.

"I've seen loved ones die. It's a reality," said Theo. "And as for my father … I would much rather face a fucking human than a huge, fire-breathing beast! Is my fear *really* that impractical?"

There was a beat of silence as the stairs ended and they all continued down a new hidden corridor. A Dementor was slowly approaching them, so Pansy touched her wand to her Dark Mark. It paused for a moment before turning and disappearing around a corner.

"Well, it would have been nice if you feared something slightly less threatening," said Pansy.

Theo grunted. "Forgive me for not realizing my deepest fear would manifest out of a ring and bloody attack me! My mistake!"

When they reached the end of the hidden corridor, Theo pushed forward and looked out of the tapestry first. The coast was clear.

They all stepped into the hall and Bronson immediately recognized the statue of the former Dark Arts professor in front of them. Theo went forward and pulled its head, revealing the hidden passageway behind it.

"This will lead us out," he said. "Something Bronson and Blaise could tell you - oh, wait! Never-fucking-mind!"

Bronson smirked. "You can thank me properly for saving your life later." He kissed him before stepping into the new corridor.

Pansy squealed. "It just gets cuter every time." She and Ron stepped through. Then Blaise. Only Goyle did not move.

"What about Astoria?" he asked.

"Unless she walks down this fucking corridor right now we don't have time to look for her," said Theo. "We only have a matter of minutes before everyone in this fucking castle knows we're traitors, and I sure as hell don't want to be here when that happens."

Goyle looked down one end of the corridor, and then the other. Of course, Astoria did not appear. He sighed before stepping into the hidden passageway. Theo followed after, shutting the statue behind them.

The corridor was not long, and they were soon stepping out of Hogwarts castle and into the snow-covered courtyard. No one was out there, since the alarm had not gone off, and Draco and Hermione were clearly still wandering the halls inside.

They all headed for the exit, only Bronson stopping when he caught sight of something red. Blood. There were two bodies lying on the other side of the courtyard. One he could tell was a man, but the other … He craned his neck and could just make out the waves of long, honey-blonde hair. His heart stopped.

Bronson moved forward. The others all stopped and looked back at him.

"Bronson!" called Theo, but his voice went unheard.

Bronson approached the body of the girl. It was broken. Smashed into the cement below the snow and twisted in abnormal directions. He kneeled down and pushed her hair aside. The top half of the face was still normal, untouched. The only eye Bronson could see was closed, her eyelashes frozen and her lips blue.

Bronson brought his hand to his mouth. He broke into tears as he stared down at Fiona. Dead.

Bronson could not believe it. This broken, bloody girl lying in front of him was his family. He had loved her since his childhood. She was the little sister he never had. Something he had realized too late, causing her more pain than he ever wanted to. For years, he and Quigley had risked their lives to find her. To save her and bring their family together again. But they had failed. She was truly lost forever.

A cool hand touched his shoulder. "Bronson, we … we need to go."

Bronson looked up to see Theo standing beside him. "Where's Quigley?" he asked.

Theo sighed. "I don't know."

"I have to go back," he said, letting Fiona's hair fall back in front of her face and jumping to his feet. "I have to find him!"

Bronson tried to run for the hidden passageway, but Theo held him back. "Bronson, no!" he shouted. "You can't fucking go back in there! It's suicide!"

"I don't care!" cried Bronson. "He's the only family I have! I can't leave him in there to die! I … I can't!"

"He won't die."

Bronson turned to Goyle with wet eyes. "What?"

"Bellatrix gave the order not to kill him. She felt life was a crueler punishment." Goyle glanced at the girl's dead body. "I imagine she was right."

"You hear that?" said Theo. "He's fine."

"He's not fine, Theo, he's -"

"*Alive*," interrupted Theo. "And we need to get out of here before we're not. You understand?"

Bronson stared down at Fiona again. He whimpered before looking at Theo and nodding.

Theo sighed in relief.

Bronson walked over to Fiona one last time and kneeled down. He bent over her and whispered, "I'm sorry we failed you." With one final kiss on her cold cheek, he stood back up and they all ran out of the courtyard.

Their eyes were on the forest as they sprinted towards it, which was why none of them were quite prepared when hundreds of people suddenly appeared in front of them mere yards from the gate. They all screamed, Bronson jumping in front of Theo, Theo, Blaise and Goyle aiming their wands, and Ron protectively pulling Pansy into him. Then their eyes began to focus on the faces in front of them.

"Fucking hell, Potter!" shouted Theo. "You're not supposed to be this fucking close!"

"Sorry," said Harry. "But we saw an opportunity to move closer when everyone was summoned inside, so we took it."

"The shield looks great, mate!" said Ron, giving him a thumbs up. "Did not see anything coming at all."

McGonagall smiled proudly. Her doing, of course.

"Blaise!"

Daphne pushed to the front of the crowd. She ran into her husband's arms and they both cried as he swung her around.

"Thank Merlin you're real!" said Blaise, pulling back and giving her a kiss.

"Did you think I wouldn't be?" she asked with a laugh.

"Feared, yes."

"*What is this*?"

Suddenly, everyone turned to see Lucy staring daggers at Ron, who still had his arm wrapped protectively around Pansy's shoulders. Ron and Pansy looked at each other awkwardly for a moment before stepping apart.

"Your girlfriend?" asked Pansy.

Ron scoffed. "Merlin, *no*. Never."

Lucy was suddenly on the verge of tears.

"Seriously, Lucy?" said Ginny. "I thought you were all in love with Cormac again after he came back from the dead."

Cormac laughed from a few rows back. "Please. I'm not that fucking desperate."

"Could have fooled me," Padma muttered under her breath. Ernie chuckled beside her.

"I don't understand you, Ron," cried Lucy. "First, a Death Eater's whore, and now a *Death Eater*?"

Pansy's jaw dropped as her face fell into a scowl. "Did you just call Granger a 'Death Eater's whore'? You are a *horrible* person!"

Ron laughed.

"You hear that, Luce!" shouted Cormac. "You were just called a horrible person by a *Death Eater*! It's time to take a long look at your fucking life!"

"Did you destroy the ring?" asked Harry, trying to get them back on topic.

"Yeah, Nott did," answered Ron. "It didn't go quite as smoothly as we'd hoped, and I sort of had to leave your cloak behind."

Harry sighed in relief. "It's fine. As long as the Horcrux is gone."

"It is," said Ron.

"Along with a little something extra," said Pansy, lifting her hand and waving her pinky finger. She and Ron laughed.

"You don't have to flirt right in front of me, Ron!"

Ron and Pansy stopped laughing, and stared at Lucy. "Does she have a bloody screw loose or something?" asked Pansy.

While they argued, Theo could not help but feel a pair of eyes on him. Several, actually, but one in particular. He looked over to see a short, blonde girl watching him. He knew her but, in that moment, his mind was too busy panicking about Draco and Hermione not being here yet to place her. Then she smiled and a million memories came rushing back to him. Most of them in his kitchen where he sat on the counter, chatting and laughing with Anna while she made him cottage pie. His favorite. This girl's smile was just the same.

Without so much as a word, Hannah stepped forward and threw her arms around Theo's waist, nuzzling her head into his chest. Theo was unclear on what to do. He looked at Bronson who, for the first time, was showing a hint of jealousy. Well, more than a hint. He looked just about ready to tear the girl right off of him.

"Umm … what are you doing?" Theo finally asked.

"Sorry," said Hannah, though she made no attempt to stop. "I hope you're not angry, but I took a look in Draco's mind and I saw how close you were with my grandmother. Thank you for taking care of her."

Hannah began to cry and Theo looked at Bronson again. His face had softened a bit and he motioned for Theo to hug her back. He slowly wrapped his arms around her shoulders and gave her a little squeeze.

Theo and Hannah stayed like that until the sound of someone screaming forced them both to look elsewhere. They turned their heads to see Pansy shaking out her hand while Lucy cowered on the ground with one hand over her eye.

"Sorry, but the bitch had it coming," said Pansy. There were several mumbles of agreement, and Cormac was laughing hysterically.

"All right, enough of this now," said Bronson, finally stepping forward, and pulling Theo and Hannah apart. Hannah cocked her hand and looked at him funnily. "Battle stances, you know." He lifted his wand. "We *are* in a war."

Hannah smiled and nodded. "Good point. Never let your guard down." She took out her wand and rejoined the lines.

Theo, Bronson, Ron, Pansy, Blaise, and Daphne all did the same, turning to face Hogwarts castle and waiting for Draco and Hermione to emerge. There was no 'if'. They *were* getting out. One way or another.

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Draco and Hermione moved through the halls with great caution. They had given up on the secret passageways ever since the last Dementor hesitated for a good twenty seconds before finally turning the other way. Unfortunately, they seemed to be hitting someone on every fucking turn and could not go in the direction they wanted. Now, they were on the complete opposite side of the castle than they had originally planned.

Putting their heads together, they tried to recall any good escape route in the area

they were currently in, but none came to mind.

"I think we need to go back," said Hermione.

Draco grunted. He knew she was right. The only way they were getting out over here was if they lucked into a hidden passageway that took them directly outside, and they could not rely on that.

Draco took Hermione's hand, and they were just about to head in the opposite direction when they heard footsteps approaching.

Looking all around, the two of them ended up ducking into the closest door, which turned out to be a broom closet.

Draco and Hermione stood very still, listening as several sets of footsteps ran by the door. But then someone else opened a door. Then shut it. Then another. It shut. And another.

Hermione looked around for something, anything to cast a Disillusionment Charm on, but there was nothing. Shit.

Their only other option was to aim their wands and hope for the best. The door burst open and they both prepared to cast their spells.

"Stop!" ordered Draco when he saw who it was standing in front of them. Astoria.

Her eyes widened as she stared at their wands in horror, making no attempt to grab her own.

"Astoria," said Draco, stepping forward. "Is anyone else out there right now?"

Astoria looked. She shook her head.

"Good. You're going to come with us all right?"

Astoria blinked. She shook her head.

"Yes, you are," he said. "Daphne is alive. She's outside right now and she's asked us to bring you to her."

Astoria's eyes lit up. "But Theo -"

"Is on our side. Always has been. He faked his memory loss and he faked Daphne's death."

She began to cry.

"I told you I would take care of you and I meant it. I won't let you -"

"Astoria!"

Astoria's eyes clenched shut as her father's voice echoed down the corridor.

"Have you found something?"

She opened them again and looked sadly at Draco before shouting, "No! I am just checking doors!" She slammed it shut.

"Forget that and head over to the other side of the castle! Pansy, Theodore and Gregory have just proven themselves traitors! They're making a run for it!"

Footsteps headed away from them.

"Shit!" spat Draco. "We almost fucking had her!"

"As long as she keeps faking it she'll be fine," said Hermione, though she was not entirely convinced herself. "We need to move."

Draco nodded. He opened the door and the two of them headed in the opposite direction of the footsteps.

Everything was going smoothly, and they were able to turn down several corridors, making it halfway to their destination when they had to stop. Bellatrix was just around the corner, barking out orders to a good three dozen Death Eaters, Snatchers, werewolves and students.

"They are still here, and I want ever *fucking* room checked before they have a chance to go anywhere! You understand?"

"Yes, Mistress."

Everyone took off running in opposite directions.

Draco and Hermione backed away, so eager to get the hell out of there that they did not check around the corner they turned on first. Draco ended up running right into a Snatcher, who looked at them in disbelief before loudly shouting, "THEY'RE OVER HERE!"

Draco silenced him with a Killing Curse before clinging tighter to Hermione's hand

and taking off running.

The halls echoed liked thunder as so many feet were suddenly headed in their direction. Draco and Hermione turned as many corners as they could in hopes of avoiding the curses and hexes being thrown at them. Many were even Killing Curses. Clearly, the Dark Lord no longer cared about Draco's safety.

In the midst of their running, Draco and Hermione did not notice the door open a few feet ahead of them. As they passed it, a spell hit them, pulling them into the room. The door slammed and they both hit the floor, looking up just in time to see Lucius casting several Locking and Shield Charms on it.

"What are you doing?" shouted Draco, rising to his feet and pulling Hermione with him. "Locking us in a fucking room isn't going to solve anything!"

Lucius looked at his son. He waved his wand to the left and a bookshelf slid out of the way, revealing a hidden door behind it.

"That will lead you to the Entrance Hall. At this point, you might as well just walk out the front door."

Hermione tried to pull Draco towards it, but he would not budge. "Draco, let's go!" she ordered as pounding began on the door.

"No," he hissed. "This isn't finished yet."

Draco raised his wand and pointed it at his father. Hermione tried to step in his way but he pushed her aside.

"Stop it, Hermione! He needs to die! He *deserves* to die after what he did to you!"

"It could have been anyone, Draco!" she yelled.

"But it wasn't! It was *him*!"

"Draco, I didn't want to do it," said Lucius. "You saw the memory. You heard the Dark Lord. My life *and* yours were on the line. I could not just sit back and -"

"What about after?" spat Draco. "When the Dark Lord offered her to you?"

Lucius blinked. "What?"

"He offered her to you! To keep! You could have said yes! You didn't have to do anything with her, but you could have said yes and kept her away from the others!

You *let* the others have her! She was not just raped by you that night, Father! THEY ALL FUCKING HAD HER BECAUSE YOU WERE TOO SELFISH TO THINK OF ANYONE BUT YOURSELF!"

"Draco, you're deluding yourself if you believe the Dark Lord would have let me keep her forever," said Lucius.

Tears dripped down Draco's cheeks. "I am not! I know he would have taken her away from you eventually! But the beginning … it didn't have to be so terrible!"

Hermione closed her eyes, unsuccessfully holding back her tears as she was brought back to that first night. It haunted her even now. In her dreams. In real life. The memories were always there, and she knew Draco was right. But she could not let him do this. She could not let him kill his father.

"Draco, please lower your wand," she said.

Draco shook his head. "No. I won't. I -"

"Draco … my son, I'm sorry." Lucius's eyes began to water as he gazed at Draco. His son. His flesh and blood. The last of his family, and the only person in this world that mattered to him. "I am sorry I hurt you, and I am sorry I hurt her." He motioned towards Hermione. "I have made so, so many mistakes in my life and, with them, I have hurt the only two people who ever mattered to me. You and your mother."

Draco's wand lowered slightly.

"There are so many things I would change. And that night …" Lucius looked at Hermione. "I never should have listened to Bellatrix. I should have killed her, or at least tried in that moment. I should have avenged my wife, and Draco and I should have run. Maybe we would not have lived for long, but anything would have been better than this." He gulped and looked at Draco again. "I have not been blind. The things I have watched you do over the years have been killing you slowly. Only in these last few months have you become alive again. Your mother would be so disappointed in me. For letting this happen to you. For not fighting harder for you.

"And you are right. I *was* selfish that night. All I saw was my own grief and, when the Dark Lord offered her to me, the only thing I thought about was how I had just betrayed my wife, and I could not do it again. It did not even occur to me to keep her away from the others." Lucius once again brought his watery eyes to Hermione. "I truly am sorry for what I did to you. I just wanted to save my son. He is the only piece of her that I have left."

Hermione took a deep breath and wiped at her eyes. "I understand why you did it," she said. "And I … I want to forgive you but -"

A loud blast shot against the door. The wood cracked.

"My shields will not hold for much longer," said Lucius. "Please, go. I will hold them off for as long as I can."

Draco's body suddenly felt heavy as he started to understand the implication of what his father was saying. "But … they will know you helped us and -"

"Draco, I know," said Lucius. "It is my time. It has been my time for many years. I am ready to go."

Even though just moments ago Draco had been ready to kill his father himself, the idea of him actually not being there hit him harder than he ever thought it would. "Father, no! I cannot let you -"

"Draco!" Lucius marched forward. He put his hand on his son's shoulder and pulled him close. "You go and you get her out of here. Fight with the resistance and finish this war. So that the two of you can live happily. Understand?"

Draco nodded as silent tears flowed from his eyes.

"When you find the one you love, you must *never* stop fighting for them. It is not about you anymore, it is about them. *Her.* Somewhere along the way, I forgot that, and I lost so much because of it."

Draco looked down as Lucius slipped something into his hand. It was a ring. An amber ring on a silver chain.

"It is never too late to start over."

Lucius wrapped his arms around Draco and hugged him tight. It was only when he heard another blast that he finally released him.

"Go!"

Hermione took Draco's hand and pulled him towards the door. "Lucius," she called when she reached it.

Lucius looked over at her.

"I *do* forgive you," she said before disappearing through the door with Draco.

Lucius smiled as he moved the bookshelf in front of it again. He knew she said it more for Draco than for him, but hearing he was forgiven gave him that final peace of mind he needed.

Facing the door, Lucius waited until the moment it burst open. As people started to swarm in, he raised his wand and cast an explosion so powerful the people in the front quickly became nothing but flying limbs.

Of course, Lucius was not an idiot. He knew that casting the spell in such a small proximity would not leave him untouched, but he was surprised when he was still alive after the explosion died down. He believed he had hit the wall and was now lying beside it, his entire body horribly burnt.

Lucius was unable to move other than his neck, which he lifted slightly, watching as a silhouette approached him through the dust and the blood. Bellatrix. Untouched, as always.

She stopped beside him and kneeled down, poking her newly acquired wand into the torn flesh just above his heart. "Where is Draco?" she asked as he cried out in pain.

"Gone," said Lucius, looking up at her. "My son is going to rip you limb from limb before this is all over. You will finally pay for what you did to my wife, you bitch."

Bellatrix raised her eyebrows. "I wouldn't be so sure of that. Say hello to my sister for me. And I suspect you will both be seeing your son again very soon."

She stood up just as someone moved the bookshelf aside. "Mistress! Over here!"

"Leave him be," ordered Bellatrix, looking at Lucius one last time. "He is already dying, we might as well let it happen slowly."

Lucius dropped his head back down as everyone headed through the doorway. He closed his eyes for a moment, his hand brushing against something in his pocket. Narcissa's necklace that he always carried. A small reminder of the woman he had lost so many years ago.

"Lucius."

And, when Lucius opened his eyes again, there she was, sitting beside him and smiling fondly.

"Narcissa …"

He reached up and stroked her cheek. She did the same to him. "It is time, my love."

Lucius nodded, overcome with a wonderful feeling of serenity as he closed his eyes once more, and joined his wife on the other side of the veil.

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Draco and Hermione ran out of the passageway, which brought them to the front of the Entrance Hall. A few Death Eaters were standing around, all a little slow to react as their targets sprinted towards the door.

"Draco!"

Draco did not have to look back to know who that voice belonged to. The Dark Lord was there. Shit.

Hermione cast a spell and blasted a hole right through the door. This way, no one could try to close it on them.

The two of them took off running into the courtyard, a gust of wind blowing their hair forward as the doors swung open behind them. Suddenly, curses were flying at them. Seeing the large head from the lion he had destroyed earlier, Draco pulled Hermione in front of him and guided them both over to it. Spells would not hit the enchanted stone.

"Only a little bit farther!" shouted Hermione, looking towards the open gate.

Draco cradled her head against his chest, and the two of them remained as low as they could as the number of spells coming at them seemed to be growing.

Hermione tried to move, but Draco pulled her back. "Hermione, I -"

"Draco, we need to go!" she shouted.

Draco shook his head. "No, I need to say this now."

She looked up at him and waited.

"I love you. No matter what happens here today, I need you to know that."

Hermione nodded. "I love you too."

"You're the only girl that I have ever loved, that I have ever seen a future with and I

… I *want* that future, Hermione. That is what I am fighting for, most of all. When you find the one you love, you fight for them. You never let them go."

Draco lifted the ring he still held in his hand.

"My ring!" shouted Hermione. "Pansy had it! Where did you -?"

"It's not important," he said. "I want you to wear it, Hermione. Not on a chain, on your finger."

Hermione's eyes grew wet as she continued to gaze at him. "You do?"

"Yes," he said, lifting her left hand and slowly slipping the ring onto her finger. "Because, when this is over, you and I are getting married. Because that is the only future I want. One with you."

Hermione cried and kissed him. "I love you, Draco. We're going to win this."

Draco nodded and slipped his mother's chain away. "You ready?"

Hermione took her newly ringed hand and entwined it with his. "Let's show them what we're fucking made of!"

Draco smirked. "I look forward to enjoying that dirty mouth of yours later."

"Well, I will definitely be down for a victory shag when this is all over."

"And that is why we are meant for each other."

Draco and Hermione shared one last, quick kiss. They each took a deep breath and nodded when they were ready.

The two of them darted out from behind the lion's head. The majority of spells coming at them were Killing Curses, so there was no blocking them. Just dodging and running like hell.

Soon, they were only ten yards from the exit. Then five. And, before Draco and Hermione knew it, they were running out the large gate and heading for the forest. Voldemort was just about to give the order to follow them when, suddenly, they vanished. He held up his hand to keep everyone in place.

"My Lord, where did they go?" asked Bellatrix from beside him.

Voldemort kept his hand raised and listened, his eyes never once leaving the spot

Draco and Hermione had just been.

"Something is coming …" he whispered.

The Dark Lord and his followers waited. It was mere moments before something shifted in the air. A shield released, sending a large gust of wind at them. Everyone closed their eyes and, when they opened them again, they were no longer staring at the empty, snow-covered grounds of Hogwarts, but at an army of hundreds. Wizards, witches, goblins, house-elves, centaurs, ghosts. They were all here. And they were all ready.

Then, one member of the army stepped forward. A bespectacled boy in his early twenties, but with green eyes that were wise beyond his years. Voldemort smiled. It seemed the prophecy was true. Draco had brought him what he wanted after all.

"Harry Potter. It has been a long time."

# Chapter 48: Revolution

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Draco and Hermione had to come to an abrupt halt when hundreds of people suddenly appeared in front of them.

"What the fuck! Why you so bloody close, Potter?"

"You would think at least one person would be appreciative that we were closer," joked Ernie.

Harry did not answer Draco. He was too busy hurrying forward and pulling Hermione into a hug. "Thank God," he cried.

Ginny was just behind him to steal the next one. While they were occupied, Draco started looking around. He let out a breath of relief when he saw Theo, Bronson, Pansy, Blaise and Goyle. And Ron too, he supposed.

"We're all fucking alive," he said, sounding a bit more surprised than he meant to.

"Where's Astoria?" asked Daphne, walking up to him. "You didn't find her?"

Draco and Hermione looked at each other and sighed. "We did," he answered. "But your father showed up and she covered for us. We couldn't get her."

Daphne whimpered. But she quickly sucked it back and rejoined the lines.

"You ready for this, Potter?" asked Draco, taking Hermione's hand.

Harry nodded. "Yes. It's time to finish this." He looked over his shoulder at McGonagall. "Remove the shield."

McGonagall smiled. "As you command, Mr. Potter."

Draco, Hermione, Ginny and Harry all stepped back with the others while McGonagall raised her wand with several wizards and witches. The wind picked up as the shield started to fade around them.

Hermione closed her eyes and let the breeze brush against her face. Draco gave her hand a squeeze. She opened her eyes and looked at him. They gazed at each other. She smiled.

"For our future, right?"

Draco smiled back. "For everyone's future, love."

Hermione nodded. She leaned up and kissed him, her lips lingering above his for a moment. Their last kiss before the battle would begin. Maybe their last kiss ever. But she refused to think like that. She and Draco would be together at the end of all of this. Happy and free.

The wind stopped. The shield was down. Hermione pulled back, keeping her eyes on Draco's. She had to force herself to look away from him, now finding the surprised faces of Voldemort's army of almost equal size watching them, and she knew even more were still inside.

Someone grabbed her hand on her other side and she turned to see Theo, looking far more nervous than she expected.

Harry took a deep breath beside her and stepped forward. Voldemort smiled wickedly.

"Harry Potter. It has been a long time."

"Longer than necessary," said Harry. "We should really do this more often."

Voldemort's smile widened. "I see you're walking quite nicely."

Harry paused for a moment. Then he smiled right back at him. "So you did know. Malfoy thought that you might."

Voldemort's eyes drifted to Draco.

"He's the one who performed the spell that healed me, by the way. Just one of the steps he took to fulfill that prophecy of yours. I suppose I should thank you. You know, for letting him slip through your fingers for so many years. He played traitor quite nicely."

Draco glanced at Harry and smirked. "Thanks for the compliment, Potter, but perhaps you should get back to the topic at hand."

"I see you have quite a few of my Death Eaters over there," said Voldemort, glancing from Goyle, to Pansy, to Theo. "Quincy, it seems you were right about your son."

Quincy looked at the Dark Lord, and then at Theo. He scowled fiercely. "Yes, my

Lord. Though, I find no glory in that."

Theo's eyes narrowed as he stared back at his father. His hand tensed in Hermione's and she squeezed on tight, ready to hold him back if necessary.

"So tell me, Potter," said Voldemort, "are there any more traitors still standing on my side?"

"You tell me," said Harry.

Voldemort's smile faded slightly. Turning his head towards his followers, he suddenly shouted, "If any of you would rather be fighting on the other side with Harry Potter then I suggest you go there now! Walk on over if that is what you wish! I will not stop you! By death or any other means!"

Draco scanned the crowd, his eyes stopping once he found Astoria in the midst of it. She looked like she was seriously contemplating this proposal. She noticed Draco looking at her and he slowly shook his head.

Voldemort caught sight of this and glanced over his shoulder, trying to see who Draco was looking at. And then he found Astoria. She stared right back at him, fear only evident in her eyes for a moment. Then she stood up straight, brought her hand to her neck and unfastened her Death Eater robes. She let them fall to the ground and stepped forward.

Arron grabbed her arm. "Astoria, what are you -?"

Astoria whipped around and jammed her wand into his neck. "You *will* release me, Father. The Dark Lord has made a proposal and I accept. I am finished with this and everything that comes with it. And that includes you."

Arron released her arm. Astoria slowly stepped away from him, keeping her wand aimed fervently.

Once she was a fair enough distance away from them, she turned around and continued walking, though she did not dare hurry her pace. It was obvious she was listening closely for any spell that might be aimed at her.

While scanning the crowd in front of her, Astoria finally located Daphne. She whimpered as she began to veer towards her sister.

Daphne let go of Blaise's hand and hurried forward.

"Daphne!" he called, trying to grab her hand again and pull her back, but she was

already gone. He went after her.

"Is that not your other daughter heading towards her, Arron?" asked Voldemort, his eyes steadily fixed on the two witches.

Arron looked at Daphne and gulped. "It is, my Lord."

"It seems young Theodore has deceived us in more ways than one."

Quincy's anger only grew behind him.

"Finish her, Arron."

Arron looked at the Dark Lord and asked, "Which one, my Lord."

"Astoria."

He went white. "But … you said -"

"That *I* would not stop her? Yes, I know. But I never said anything about you." Voldemort's scarlet eyes burned as he stared at all of his Death Eaters standing on the other side. "Finish her."

Arron stepped forward, his wand hand unmoving as he watched his two daughters approach each other. Astoria was almost there. Then his eyes moved to Daphne. The real problem child. It was obvious that she had set Astoria astray.

His hand tightened around his wand. The Dark Lord would punish him for it, but he did not care. He knew what he had to do.

Astoria was mere yards away from Daphne now and, so far, Voldemort had been true to his word. She quickened her pace, tears stinging behind her eyes as her sister opened her arms. She ran into them, both of them crying instantly.

"I am so sorry I left you behind," Daphne whispered as she stroked her little sister's hair.

She kept one arm around Astoria's shoulders and turned them so they were once again walking towards the resistance. Blaise was only a short distance away. He smiled when his wife looked at him, but then his eyes drew to something behind her, his face suddenly becoming very grave.

"Daphne, look out!"

Astoria was already turning before Blaise even spoke. She had still been listening and heard the start of the spell. She found the recipient, shoved Daphne out of the way and shouted, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Astoria was hit with a Killing Curse less than a second before her father.

Daphne cried out in horror as her sister hit the ground. In a matter of seconds, she had become the sole surviving member of her family. She tried to run to her, but Blaise held her back, attempting to pull her towards the lines before Voldemort could order anyone else to attack.

"We can't leave her in the middle like that."

Hermione turned towards Theo. She had barely heard his whisper. "What?"

His hand released from hers. "Her body will be trampled!" he shouted.

Theo rushed forward. Hermione tried to follow him but Draco held her back. Unfortunately, he did not have enough hands to stop Bronson, as well.

Keeping his wand aimed at the Dark Lord, Theo ran to Astoria's body. The first thing he did was close her eyes, his heart instantly flooding with regret that he did not go back for her at Goyle's request. That he did not try harder to get her to come with him when he had seen her before. That he had not stuffed her unconscious body in a broom closet the moment it crossed his mind. At least then she might have had a chance.

While Theo picked up her body, Bronson stood protectively in front of him, his wand raised and ready to strike at anyone who dared try and take out Theo.

"That is touching, wouldn't you say, Quincy?" asked Bellatrix with a laugh. "Your son's lover is protecting him so valiantly."

"Watch your tongue, woman!" spat Quincy. "Before this day is over, that Mudblood will be dead by my hand, and my son will be back under his lordship's control."

"You still wish to spare him, Quincy?" asked Voldemort as he watched Bronson closely.

"For my bloodline and my bloodline alone, my Lord. I feel *nothing* for my son anymore."

"Good. As it should be," said Voldemort. "Love is a weakness, and I have every intention of proving that today." He kicked Arron's body, which had fallen near his

feet. "Get rid of him."

Several of his servants hurried forward.

Daphne was still wrestling with Blaise a few feet away from Theo, screaming for her sister. Theo carried Astoria over to a large rock and propped her up against it.

Finally breaking loose from Blaise, Daphne ran to Astoria's side, collapsing to her knees and crying hysterically as she hugged her tightly.

Admitting defeat, Blaise took a stance next to Bronson and raised his wand protectively.

Pansy watched Daphne crying from the sidelines. With a grunt, she ran over to her.

"Hey!" She grabbed her friend's shoulders, made her look directly into her eyes, and then smacked the hell out of her. "Snap out of it!"

Daphne was numb to the pain. "B-but … my sister …"

"Died just now pushing you out of the bloody way? Yeah, I saw," said Pansy. "She didn't do that so you could be a bawling idiot in the middle of a battlefield! Now, go! Get back in the lines and prepare yourself to fight in Astoria's honor!"

Daphne blinked.

"Go!"

She nodded her head wildly, turning one last time to give her sister a kiss on the cheek before standing up and running back to the lines with Pansy, Theo, Blaise and Bronson.

"You all right?" Hermione asked Theo as he retook his place by her side.

He nodded unconvincingly. "It was just the first of many, Granger. It would be wise to remember that."

"Is she finished?" Voldemort called across the courtyard. During Daphne's crying session, his followers had moved several steps closer while he stood in the same place on the steps leading up to the castle. "You are not the only ones who wants to finish this. Once and for all."

"I would like nothing more," responded Harry. "At least one of us will die here

today, Voldemort. And I have no intention of it being me."

"Funny," said Voldemort, smiling faintly. "I have no intention of it being me, either."

All of Voldemort's followers turned and looked at him.

"Your orders, my Lord?" asked Bellatrix.

Keeping his eyes straight ahead, Voldemort crossed his arms behind his back and said. "Kill them all. But Harry Potter," his eyes drifted to Harry's side, "*and* Draco Malfoy are mine. You may harm them all you want, but death will be by my wand."

"Yes, my Lord."

His many Death Eaters, Snatchers and Werewolves all turned forward. Fenrir Greyback licked his lips as he watched Ginny on Harry's other side. She met his gaze and stood confidently. Harry knew what she was now and he still loved her. To her, Greyback was just another name on her hit list, and he would suffer dearly for what he did to her.

"Shall we begin?" Voldemort raised his hands and his followers moved forward.

But Harry did not move. No one fighting for the resistance did. Their enemies were approaching the end of the courtyard.

"Arm yourselves!" Draco called to those on the front lines.

They all turned sideways and formed arrows in their hidden hands, those with enough skill planting curses on their tips. Everyone from Draco's class formed the first two rows, and the centaurs were just behind them. While they were stubborn creatures, no one could argue that the world would be a better place if Voldemort was not in it. That was all of the convincing they needed to join the battle that day.

"Ready!" Draco ordered.

Everyone raised their arrows and pulled back their arms like they were shooting a bow. Only the centaurs used a real one, lifting theirs high so they were above the humans' heads.

Voldemort's followers froze when they saw what was coming for them. Several turned, but it was already too late.

"FIRE!"

Arrows shot through the sky, creating whistles in the wind before piercing the Death Eaters who were too slow to put up any sort of shield. Quincy put one in front of him just in time, looking a bit surprised when the tip of the arrowhead still managed to poke through. Some people were only hit in the arm or shoulder, but horrible curses spread through their bodies, either killing them or making them immobile. One person beside Quincy even wasted away, flesh falling from his body and his bones turning black until he was nothing but dust.

"Pretty brutal spell for the side of good," mocked Bellatrix from beside him.

Voldemort's surviving followers marched onward.

The resistance raised their next arrows, this time the tips infected with a spell Draco had taught them that was capable of breaking shields.

"FIRE!" ordered Draco before their enemies could get much closer.

The arrows shot forward, moving even quicker than before. Most of Voldemort's followers put up a shield this time, but it was of little use. Since the earlier one had already pierced his shield, Quincy raised his hand and stopped the arrow coming for him when it was mere inches from his heart. He looked at his son, but Theo was crouched down while the others shot arrows over his head. He did not know the spell. But one look to his side and Quincy saw exactly who was aiming for him. Draco's Mudblood. Trying to do Theo's dirty work for him, probably for the same reason she did not want Draco killing his father. To save his soul, if such a thing was even possible.

Draco, of course, had been aiming for Bellatrix, but his arrow did not even come close to her. No arrow did. She was untouchable.

"Abbott!" called Draco.

Hannah moved so she was beside him.

"You are the only one strong enough to get into my aunt's head. I need you to go in there and find out what dark magic she is using to protect herself. Can you do that?"

Hannah nodded. "Yes, I think so."

"Stay close to me," said Draco. "I'll protect you while you're in there."

Hannah nodded again.

Draco looked at Harry. "Your orders, Potter."

Harry's entire body was shaking. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Then his body stiffened. His eyes snapped open and fell upon the approaching forces. There was still a shield in front of the resistance, protecting them from all spells, but the moment he stepped through it, it would be broken.

Staring fiercely at his enemies, the people who had helped desecrate Hogwarts, a place he had once loved so much, not to mention the world, Harry raised his wand high above his head and shouted, "ATTACK!"

The resistance all cheered as they lifted their wands and ran forward, the protective shield breaking around them the moment Harry's foot hit the line.

Killing Curses were instantly buzzing by ears, hitting hearts, killing both enemies and comrades. Draco killed a Snatcher immediately. So did Hermione.

It was not long before the two masses were entangled with one another, the horrible stench of fire and burning flesh already inflicting the air. It was chaos. Just as Draco always imagined it would be. He tried his best to make everyone faceless, because that was the only way to truly detach yourself during a war. But then there was a blast. He closed his eyes and ducked. When he opened them again, the lifeless body of Justin Finch-Fletchley landed right in front of him. And it suddenly became real.

Draco shot back up and began scanning the crowd for Hermione. She was only a few feet away, doing the exact same thing. She ran to him, flipping a Snatcher that grabbed her over her shoulder and shooting a Killing Curse at him once he was flat on the ground. Draco slashed his wand and cut a werewolf's throat that got in his way.

When Hermione reached him, he took her hand. "Let's get to my aunt."

She nodded.

A ball of fire shot in their direction and Hermione put up a shield to protect them. Draco located Hanna fighting a Death Eater just behind him and finished the job.

"The time is now, Abbott!"

Hannah gulped. "Okay."

She shadowed Draco and Hermione through the chaos. They already knew where Bellatrix was. All they had to do was follow the long, red hair.

Voldemort watched the battle from the bottom of the steps in the courtyard. He smiled as the scent of blood filled the air. Footsteps shuffled against the stone behind him. They stopped abruptly. His smile grew.

"Do you see what I have created, boy? What *you* have helped me create?"

Voldemort turned to see Quigley staring vacantly into the battle in front of him.

"None of this could have happened without your betrayal and, for that, I will spare you the horrible death your friends will endure." The Dark Lord turned forward once more. "It is a shame you are a Mudblood. Someone as deceitful as you would have done well in my forces."

Quigley slowly turned his head towards Voldemort, his eyes blinking once before continuing to where his sister lay dead. His body, his heart, everything was numb. He could not even cry as he looked at her.

Without a word, Quigley stepped forward. Down one step, and then the next. He passed Voldemort without even a glance in his direction.

"Going to join the battle, are you? Will you not tell me which side you will be fighting for?"

Voldemort laughed as Quigley continued onward. There was no wand in his hand, no determination on his face, no life in his soul. He was heading onto the battlefield to die, by whatever hand would take him.

Quigley walked into the battle with slow steps. His eyes remained forward and unblinking as he treaded between duels, praying, hoping that a spell would hit him. On purpose by accident, he did not care. Just as long as it would end the pain he was trying so hard to fight.

A loud explosion sounded to his left and Quigley finally felt something. A sting jabbing at his side as he hit snow.

"Th'fuck are you doing?" a clouded voice screamed in his ear.

Quigley blinked several times. His eyes began to focus. He could just make out Theo on top of him, shielding him as best he could as another explosion sounded.

When it was over, Theo stood up and pulled Quigley with him. "Are you fucking mad? Where's your wand?" he shouted.

"I-I …"

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

A Killing Curse shot at Theo, but he was shoved out of the way and it ended up hitting a Snatcher who was unfortunate enough to be standing behind him.

"What are you doing?"

Someone grabbed Quigley by the neck of his jumper and forced him to look into their eyes. Bronson.

"Why the hell would you come onto a battlefield unarmed?"

Looking at his friend, Quigley's eyes immediately began to tear. "I … Fiona …"

"Yes, I saw," said Bronson, waving his wand and sending a Death Eater coming for them flying somewhere else.

"Bronson, I … I'm sorry, I -"

"I fucking know, Quigs!" shouted Bronson. "But committing suicide isn't going to solve anything! If you're not going to fight then go!" He released his friend and pushed him towards the forest.

Quigley stumbled for a few feet, but then turned back to Bronson. "But I -"

"Fucking go, Quigley! You are the last of my family and I will *not* see you die here today! Not like this!"

Quigley gulped. He nodded slowly and turned away from Bronson. His best mate. His oldest friend. His brother. He got as far as the trees before he was turning around, his eyes scanning the crowd and catching glimpses of the few people left in this world who mattered to him. All of them fighting for the future they had once talked about. One where they were not in hiding, pretending to be something they were not. Where they could be free again, and be with the ones they loved without judgment, torture or exile.

What was he doing? Quigley was many things, but a coward was not one of them. He could not let the others fight this battle without him. Not when leaving meant losing even more than he already had. He took his wand out of his pocket, clutched it tightly and slowly returned to the battlefield.

Theo and Bronson were trying hard not to lose sight of Draco and Hermione in the crowd. They knew they were going after Bellatrix, and while Theo wanted to find and kill his father, it would have to wait.

Unfortunately, Quincy had other plans. He had kept his eye on Theo the entire time, trying to get to him. And, when Draco and Hermione were only a few steps away, he finally got his chance.

Quincy sent a spell blazing in front of Theo, forcing him to stumble backwards into Bronson. Theo turned his head, his face growing hot the moment his eyes landed on his father.

"I have been looking for you, *Son*," said Quincy with an evil smirk.

"Have you?" asked Theo as he straightened himself up. "I thought you would be busy collecting on those wagers you made regarding my memory."

"While I do enjoy being proven right, I believe there are more important matters at hand."

"Like my death?" spat Theo.

Quincy's smile softened. "No, Theo. You are my only son. My bloodline. You will not die. At least, not until you have fathered a child."

"And you really expect me to cooperate -?"

"Of course not," interrupted Quincy. "Which is why you will be Imperiused by the Dark Lord the moment this battle is over. But he."

Quincy motioned his head and Theo turned to look at Bronson, standing faithfully by his side.

"*He* will die." Quincy moved his wand so it was aimed at Bronson. "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Theo shoved Bronson out of the way. "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Quincy dodged the spell. "No son of mine will ever be a fag!" he spat, his eyes cruel as he used a spell to try and knock Theo unconscious.

Bronson stood up from where he had fallen. "*Avada Ke* -"

"*Crucio*!"

He had to leap out of the way before he could finish. He looked to his right to see Antonin Dolohov pointing his wand at him.

Antonin smiled. "Time to die, Mudblood."

"I want to kill that one, Dolohov!" shouted Quincy. "You keep my son busy!"

Antonin grunted but still followed orders. He tried to hit Theo with the Cruciatus Curse, but Theo was quick to dodge.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" Quincy went for Bronson again, but Bronson ducked and hit him with a Leg-Locker Curse from below. It was only meant to be a nuisance while he tried to come up with some sort of plan. Bronson knew he was not the greatest dueler in the world, and not only was this one of Voldemort's top Death Eaters, but he also had a personal vendetta against him. Quincy wanted Bronson dead, and it would take one hell of a miracle for him to fail.

Draco glanced back when he heard Theo shouting at his father. Quincy was going strong after Bronson and Theo was having one hell of a time getting back to them with Antonin continuously shooting curses at him. Hermione followed his eyes and gasped. She tried to move towards them but Draco kept a firm grip on her hand.

"You are not leaving my sight!" he shouted. Then he looked around frantically, his eyes not stopping until he located Pansy, Ron and Goyle all fighting near each other. "Pansy!"

She turned and looked.

"Help Theo and Bronson!" He motioned with his head.

Pansy nodded. She quickly killed the Snatcher she was dueling, and urged Ron and Goyle to follow her.

Turning forward once more, Draco, Hermione and Hannah finally reached Ginny. She and Harry were currently dueling a Death Eater, but her eyes were already fixed on the wild looking witch just behind him. Bellatrix.

Draco stepped forward and killed the Death Eater with one quick blast.

Bellatrix glanced sideways from her current duel and smiled. Charlie and Fleur were the two fighting against her. She swiped her wand and slashed Charlie across the face, then she swiped it again and sent Fleur flying backwards. Draco released Hermione's hand and hurried forward. He cast a spell to slow Fleur down and was able to catch her before she could land in a swarm of werewolves.

"You have a daughter to get home to!" shouted Draco. "Let me deal with this one!"

Fleur's eyes grew wet. She nodded.

Charlie ran over, completely oblivious to the blood dripping in his eyes as he checked on Fleur. Draco handed her off to him.

"Finish her, Malfoy," said Charlie as he took Fleur's hand. "For my mum."

Draco nodded. "Go!"

Fleur and Charlie ran off into the chaos. They would not stop fighting, but there would be no more suicide duels in their future.

Draco looked back to see Hermione dueling a pair of Snatchers with Harry. He moved to help her. She looked at him and shouted, "Draco, no! Finish this! I'll be fine, I promise!"

One of the Snatchers shot a blast at her. She blocked it and sent one twice as strong back at him. Draco and Hermione locked eyes again, and Draco nodded before again heading for Bellatrix.

Ginny had already approached his aunt and was dueling her hardest. Draco went over to Ginny and grabbed her arm. "Don't waste your energy just yet, Weaselette," he whispered.

"I was wondering when you were going to come and find me, nephew," said Bellatrix, smiling wickedly as she sent a blast between Draco and Ginny. They dodged in opposite directions.

Hannah stayed close, trying to seem engaged in another battle she was not even part of. So Bellatrix would not see her coming.

"So do you have a thing for this one, too?" Bellatrix motioned towards Ginny. "A Mudblood and a blood traitor. How the mighty truly have fallen."

"Well, I haven't fallen quite as far as your husband did when he jumped off of that tower," said Draco, smirking wickedly.

Bellatrix's face fell into a horrible scowl. "You're the one who Imperiused him, aren't you? You sick, twisted little -"

"Is that what you're telling yourself?" Draco chuckled. "*No one* Imperiused him, auntie dearest. Rodolphus let Hermione go on his own. He brought her to me and then he took it upon himself to create a distraction so we could escape. Of course, we had no idea he was going to jump, but it is not like we would have done

anything if we had. Rodolphus was at the top of my hit list. Just below you."

Bellatrix lifted her nose high in the air. "And *you* are at the top of mine, nephew. Just above your father." She smirked. "Who I had the pleasure of watching die slowly. Just like your mother." Her eyes moved to Ginny. "*And* yours."

Ginny turned red with rage. "You will pay!"

She raised her wand and the duel officially began. Curses were fired left and right but, of course, nothing even came close to hitting Bellatrix. Luckily, his aunt was not aiming to kill. She was having more fun playing with her food.

Draco tried to sneak around Bellatrix's back while Ginny kept her busy, but his aunt kept turning to and fro, wanting to give them both equal attention.

Ginny pushed forward, attempting to get Bellatrix closer to Hannah. The other witch took a few steps back, then turned and shot a few curses at Draco. He dodged and ended up stopping right next to Hannah.

The moment Bellatrix turned back towards Ginny, Draco grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back. He whipped her body around. "Now, Abbott!"

Hannah raised her wand and pressed it to Bellatrix's forehead. "*Legilimens*!"

Hannah was only in her mind for a few seconds when the other witch successfully pushed her out of it. Bellatrix struck her wand and sent Hannah flying backwards with an incredible force.

Theo turned just in time to see Hannah coming at him. He held out his arms and caught her, but was still sent tumbling to the ground.

"Abbott!" he shouted as she moved sluggishly against him.

"T-the supreme … supreme act of evil …"

"What?"

"D-Draco's mother's blood … fresh on her hands … You-Know-Who … blood … murder … a spell … there was a spell … protection against all magic …"

"Who's the girl, Nott?"

Theo looked up to see Antonin standing above him. He hugged Hannah closer to him as she drifted into a state of unconsciousness.

"She's a pretty one. But, of course, pansy's like you wouldn't notice such things. Perhaps, when this is over, I can keep her as my pet." He poked Hannah with his wand. "Doesn't look like she'll be doing much more fighting today."

Theo hit Antonin's wand away. He tried to stand, but he did not want to leave Hannah lying on the ground, so he carried her with him, propping her up with one arm.

Antonin laughed. "Are you really going to fight like that?"

"If I have to," said Theo.

"Leave the girl, young Nott. She's not worth your life." Antonin pushed Theo so he fell back down. He aimed his wand at Hannah. "*Avada Ke* -"

"*Relligo*!"

A rope shot out of nowhere and bound Antonin's arms to his sides. "What the -?"

"*Relligo*!"

Another rope appeared. This one around his neck.

"*Relligo*!"

His legs were now bound.

"*Relligo*!

The last rope bound his chest.

Theo looked up to see Katie Bell standing just behind him. She had cast the first spell. Considering he had not seen her since taking her friend's life right in front of her, he was a bit surprised by this act.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"You killed Anthony quickly and without pain," answered Katie. "I understand the position you and Draco were in, and I thank you for not torturing him first, like I'm sure many of your comrades would have done." She looked down at him. "This is my platoon showing you gratitude for your mercy." She glanced at her three comrades standing in a circle around Antonin. "Ready!"

The others all nodded.

"*Segmentum*!" they all shouted together, pulling their ropes so they cut through Antonin like knives, slicing him into four pieces.

Blood splattered on all of their faces. Katie and her platoon dropped their ropes, which quickly vanished.

"Padma!" she called.

Padma turned from where she was dueling a Death Eater with Ernie.

"Help Hannah!"

Padma ran over. Katie looked down at Theo once more and nodded before disappearing with her platoon.

Falling to her knees, Padma took Hannah's face in her hands. "What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Theo. "She just flew at me out of nowhere."

"Abbott!"

They both looked up to see Draco pushing his way through the battle. He dropped down beside them, taking one look at Hannah and grunting when he realized she was unconscious.

"Shit!" His eyes moved to Theo. "Did she say anything before she went out?"

Theo thought for a second. "Yes. She was mumbling something about the supreme act of evil and … and your mother. 'Draco's mother's blood fresh on her hands'. That's what she said. Then she went on about You-Know-Who and blood and murder and … and a spell, I think. Protection against all magic."

Draco stared at Theo, his eyes unblinking as he processed what he had just said. *The supreme act of evil*. He knew those words.

Draco stood slowly, turning his head so he could see Bellatrix, who was still dueling with Ginny.

"A Horcrux …" he whispered.

He stepped forward.

"Draco, look out!"

Draco whipped around at the sound of Pansy's voice. A blazing ball of fire was headed right towards him, but there was no time to react. He stared in horror as it approached, time slowing enough for him to picture Hermione and the future that would never be, but not enough for him to get his wand up to protect him. He closed his eyes and waited.

"No!"

Someone shoved him hard. The fireball singed his arm but, other than that, he was untouched.

"ERNIE! NO!"

At the sound of the name, Draco shot back up. He looked at the spot he had just been, the spot where Ernie was now lying, blood spurting out of his mouth and his horribly charred chest.

"Mack!" Draco crawled over to him. "No, no, fuck no! Mack! What the fuck were you doing?" he cried. "Why?"

Ernie slowly lifted his shaky arm. He pointed one finger at Draco and used it to poke him weakly in the chest. "W-we're ev …" He gulped. "…even."

"Ernie!" Suddenly Padma was by his side, taking Ernie's hand in hers and stroking his cheek. "Baby, please! Please, hold on! I have potions! They can help you!"

Ernie shook his head as best he could. He squeezed tightly onto her hand. "Pa-Padma, I …" gulp … "I l-lo … love you."

Padma shook her head frantically as tears pooled from her eyes. "Baby, please, no. Please, don't leave me."

"N-never," he said as a single tear dripped from his cheek. But then his eyes went still, his body stiff as his grip on her hand loosened until it was nothing.

"No," Padma cried, shaking her head in disbelief. "No, no, no!"

She fell onto his body, hugging him tightly and pleading for him to wake up.

Draco grabbed her shoulders and pulled her upright. "Patil, get it together!"

"B-but …"

"You *cannot* just sit here crying over him. We are in the middle of a battlefield! You

understand?"

She nodded her head but Draco was not convinced she had heard him.

"Ernie would want you to survive this! He did not give his life so you could die crying over his body!"

Padma nodded again, this time with more comprehension and determination. She wiped her eyes and stood back up. Raising her wand and soon beginning a heated battle with the Death Eater who had sent the blast.

Draco looked down at Ernie one last time. "Damn it, Mack! We were already fucking even!"

He closed Ernie's eyes before standing back up, scanning the crowd until he spotted Ron, who was currently helping Bronson battle Quincy.

"Weasel!"

Ron turned towards him.

"The sword! Give me the sword!"

Ron blinked. It took him a moment to process what Draco had said, then he was grabbing the Sword of Gryffindor from its holster and tossing it across the crowd to Draco.

Draco caught it. He brought it to his side and began marching back the way he had come with an even stronger fire burning in his heart.

*The supreme act of evil …*

When Draco first heard Theo say these words, he had thought that Bellatrix made her own Horcruxes, but the Dark Lord would never allow such a thing. Giving someone else immortality would make them his equal, and Voldemort considered himself to be above everyone. The most powerful wizard. The ultimate Lord. But to make a person a Horcrux … it was so horribly unheard of that there had to be an extra step involved. Two murders. One from the Horcrux, and the other from its maker. Bellatrix had killed his mother, and Voldemort had rewarded her with a spell, one that protected her from all magic. Draco doubted that she even realized what she was.

Someone fired a Cruciatus Curse at Draco. He easily stepped out of its way and killed the caster. Then his mind drifted back to his conversation with the Dark Lord

in his parlor. Just after he had suffered thirty-nine curses by his best friend's and his father's hands. The cruelest type of punishment.

"… *Until now, your aunt, Bellatrix, is the only one I have deemed loyal enough to keep my secrets. I have decided it is time I take on another, and you are the one I have chosen …*"

That is what the Dark Lord had said to him. Only now did Draco understand the implication. He had chosen Draco to be the next possessor of a piece of his twisted and horribly torn soul. If he had not left with Hermione when he did then this is what would have happened to him. There would have been no way to win this war without his sacrifice. It was just one more way she had saved his life.

Bellatrix was too distracted playing with Ginny to notice Draco tearing through the crowd. She knocked the girl to the ground and cackled. When Ginny tried to raise her wand, Bellatrix stepped on her hand and held it in place. Ginny cried out in agony as the woman's boot jammed into her.

"Don't worry, blood traitor. I'm not going to kill you. Greyback has been requesting you as his pet for years. And, once Harry Potter is dead, I suppose you will be a free woman as it is. I hope you're ready to suffer years of pain and torture by that filthy werewolf's -"

Someone rammed into Bellatrix and pushed her far away from Ginny. She stumbled, and then looked over to see Hermione helping Ginny to her feet.

"Well, well, if it isn't my nephew's Mudblood." She smirked. "I was wondering when you were going to make an appearance." She aimed her wand at Hermione. "*This* is for my husband. *Avada Kedavra*!"

Hermione leapt out of the way.

"*Crucio*!" shouted Ginny. It zoomed right by Bellatrix's ear. She screamed in frustration. Then lunged forward and punched the woman.

Bellatrix barely flinched. She stood back up straight and spit a little blood from her mouth. "Is that the best you've got, blood traitor? *Avada Kedavra*!"

She began shooting Killing Curses left and right, not caring who she hit but somewhat aiming for Ginny and Hermione.

"You filthy pets will bow to the Dark Lord before this day is over!" The Killing Curses stopped. "*Crucio! Crucio! CRUCIO*!"

Hermione failed to dodge the last one. It hit her with such a force that she shot three feet in the air before landing hard on her back.

"BELLATRIX!"

Bellatrix turned to see Draco marching towards her. "*Cruci -*"

Before she could finish the spell, Draco had lifted a sword he held in his hands. She backed away, but she was not quick enough, and Draco soon forced the sword into her gut. She looked down, her eyes wide as a thick, black liquid dripped from the wound.

"A Horcrux!" shouted Harry from where he was helping Hermione off of the ground.

"A-another?" said Hermione as her eyes began to focus. "But there is no way."

Draco watched as the black liquid continued to pour out of Bellatrix. "Do you even know what you are?" he asked, looking into his aunt's eyes. "Just another puppet in the Dark Lord's twisted game. You were strong, so he used you. The same way he wanted to use me."

The black liquid stopped falling from her wound and, soon, there was nothing but red. Blood. Draco could feel the protective shield break around her. He twisted the sword inside of her. She cringed, her wand now falling from her hand.

Draco smiled. "I have waited for this moment for nearly five years. Ever since the day you killed my mother, I knew I would be the one to destroy you." He yanked the sword out of her in one forceful motion. Bellatrix struggled to stay on her feet. "Finish her, Weaselette."

Ginny stepped forward and pointed her wand at Bellatrix. "THIS IS FOR MY MOTHER, YOU BITCH!"

A jet of green light shot from Ginny's wand and hit Bellatrix directly over her heart. The woman's eyes bulged during that horrible moment of clarity. It was over. She had lost. And, as her dead body began to topple over, Ginny hit her again, this time with a curse Draco had never seen before, blasting her body into nothing but black ash. Bellatrix was gone, and now there were no traces of her left in the world.

But the relief they all felt only lasted a moment, because there was a scream. A horrible, violent scream that echoed across the grounds. Voldemort was no longer standing in the courtyard. He was out, standing near the gates. And his eyes … his angry, wild, scarlet eyes were pointed at them. It was time. The Dark Lord was

ready to finish this. He was ready for blood …

# Chapter 49: The End

**A/N: While the title of this chapter may confuse you, this is not the end. One more chapter. :o)**

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The entire battle halted as Voldemort stepped out of the courtyard. Even his own followers cowered in fear when he walked forward, red seeming to burn off of him as his eyes fell upon Draco. Not Harry. Draco.

In a quick wave of Voldemort's hand, the red flew outward, setting a blazing fire on all those around him. Everyone within a three yard radius dropped dead instantly. His followers, the resistance, it did not matter. Lavender was among them. So was Kennil.

Voldemort did not halt until he was standing beside Quincy, but his eyes never left Draco. "Kill the traitors first," he announced to his followers. "*All* of them."

Quincy tensed beside him. "But, my Lord -"

"Either your son dies, Quincy, or *you* do."

Voldemort continued onward, curses flying at him but all vanishing with a simple wave of his hand.

Quincy looked down at Theo, who was presently casting a spell on some unconscious girl to keep her arms around his neck. They locked eyes as he slowly stood with her on his back.

Quincy raised his wand. So did Theo. But just when it seemed like his father was going to strike, Quincy surprised everyone by moving his wand sideways and shouting, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Goyle did not have time to react, and he dropped dead instantly. Pansy screamed.

"You heard the Dark Lord! Kill the traitors first!" shouted Quincy to the Death Eaters around him. Then his eyes fell back on Theo. "But my son is mine."

In a matter of seconds, Pansy - the only traitor left who had not been claimed - was being swarmed by five Death Eaters. She killed one and Ron killed another. Then two Snatchers arrived.

Bronson was torn between trying to help her and wanting to get to Theo but, when he moved in Theo's direction, Quincy waved his wand and sent him flying

backwards. Theo tried to run after him but, before he could, his father's wand was back on him.

"Don't worry. He'll get what's coming to him in due time." He turned towards the Death Eaters currently dueling Pansy and said, "Keep the Mudblood busy while you're at it."

Two of them immediately starting shooting curses at Bronson. Theo looked at him and sighed before raising his own wand at his father.

"Wouldn't this be easier without the strange girl on your back?" asked Quincy.

"I'm not putting her down," answered Theo.

"Have it your way. *Avada Kedavra*!"

Theo leapt out of the way as quickly as he could. He began firing spells at his father who, in return, kept shooting the Killing Curse at him. It was obvious he was not trying very hard. At least, not yet.

Everyone cleared out of the way as Voldemort approached Draco. His body was still burning red and both sides were afraid to go near it.

The moment his path was completely clear, Voldemort sent a blazing ball of fire at Draco. He quickly deflected it, sending it flying right back at the dark wizard. Voldemort stepped through it without a scratch. Then he sent three more at Draco, but Draco's spells would not block these ones. He was forced to dodge. Voldemort waved his wand again and sent Draco tumbling in the snow.

"The Killing Curse is too generous for you, Draco," he said in his cruel, hoarse voice. "Your death will be slow and it will be painful."

Draco stood back on his feet as quickly as he could. Harry tried to distract Voldemort by shooting a spell at him, but the Dark Lord simply sidestepped it. He waved his hand and sent Harry flying off somewhere.

Without turning his head, he said, "It is not our time yet, Harry Potter. Soon we will have our moment, but not yet. First, I must take care of some unfinished business."

Eyes on each other, Voldemort and Draco both raised their wands.

"Have I really pissed you off so much that you're willing to push Potter aside for me?" asked Draco with a smirk. "I have to say, my Lord, I'm touched. Flattered even."

"You talk far too much, boy!"

Draco's smirk widened. "And I'm just getting started. *Avada Kedavra*!"

Of course, the curse missed. Because it was not Draco's destiny to defeat him. He was not the chosen one. But, dammit, he was going to try.

Draco and the Dark Lord began dueling, their bodies burning hot and the snow beneath their feet melting as they both aimed to kill. Voldemort missed Draco by an inch and his spell continued into the forest, destroying everything in its path. Several resistance members ran to put out the fire before it could destroy everything.

Hermione did not remove her eyes from Draco as she helped Harry back to his feet. Once she confirmed he was all right, they both continued forward, ready to join the battle. But, before they arrived, a horrible scream shot through the air around them.

Their eyes searched the battlefield until they found Ginny, knocked to the ground and struggling as Fenrir Greyback bound her wrists.

"You will be my prisoner, blood traitor. That is, until you learn to respect me the way all werewolves should."

Ginny spit at him. Her wand was lost somewhere but, while he cringed, she grabbed his wrist and channeled his magic, using it to unbind herself. "*Accio wand*!"

Her wand flew into her hands from somewhere on the battlefield and she used it to send Greyback flying off of her. But it was not long before he was coming back again.

Harry hesitated. He had been running for Voldemort, knowing that was where he needed to go. But seeing Ginny, the girl he loved, in danger shifted something inside of him, and, suddenly, his feet were leading him somewhere different. He forced himself to stop.

"Harry, go!"

Harry turned to see Hermione still standing beside him.

"Help Ginny kill that son of a bitch! Draco and I will keep Voldemort busy!"

"B-but …"

"GO!" she ordered, sternly pointing her finger towards Ginny.

Harry smiled and nodded. Then he ran one direction and Hermione ran another.

Hermione reached Voldemort and immediately shouted, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

The Dark Lord stepped out of the Killing Curse's way and turned to see who had cast it. He smiled when he saw Hermione standing there. "Well, Draco, it looks like your little Mudblood has come to join us. Shall we give her a proper greeting?"

Voldemort sent a blast in her direction that seemed to be similar to the one he had shot at Draco. Hermione ducked to avoid it. But there was something different about this fire. As it flew over her head, suddenly it took on the appearance of a horrible serpent. It landed on the ground and slithered, maiming and killing several people before turning back around, its burning eyes focused on Hermione.

"Fiendfyre," she whispered. Only, this was different. There was only one flaming beast and, while nothing caught on fire, it seemed dead-set on killing its target. Which was her.

Draco, recognizing it for what it was, tried to extinguish the flames. Nothing happened.

Voldemort laughed wickedly. "Only the target can put it out, Draco. I am certain you have not forgotten."

The fiendfyre serpent let out a deafening shriek before slithering towards Hermione. She cast the charm she knew to cease the flames, but nothing happened.

"It's not normal fiendfyre, Hermione!" shouted Draco. "There's another spell! You have to -"

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

Draco leapt out of the way as the Killing Curse came towards him. He looked over to see Voldemort smiling. He began shooting curses at him left and right, giving Draco no time to explain the spell to Hermione.

"*Glacio* -" he shouted at her before dodging another Killing Curse.

Hermione barely heard him as she took off running. The serpent was right at her heels and ready to strike. She tried just shouting, "*Glacio*!" but it did not work. There had to be more to it.

Deep into the battlefield, Pansy was knocked on her back after one of the Death Eaters shot a Killing Curse at her. A wand pointed at her chest but, before the person had a chance to strike, they fell on top of her in a lifeless heap. She shoved them off and stood back up, relieved to see that Ron was still fighting beside her, even though his eyes kept drifting over to where his sister and Harry were dueling Fenrir Greyback.

"Just go!" she shouted. "They've been given an order! They're going to get me no matter -"

"No!" he shouted back at her. "They're *not* going to get you, Parkinson! We're going to get them!"

Ron raised his wand and continued to duel with the growing pack of Death Eaters and Snatchers. Pansy gazed at him with teary eyes before shaking them away and joining him.

Bronson was dueling close by with his own nuisances. He was still trying to get to Theo, who was in the midst of a half-assed battle with his father.

Using a Binding Spell because it was quick, Bronson took a few enemies out of the battle. He moved towards Theo but, before he could get too far, a new person joined in. A tall, burly, and hairy wizard who just *had* to be a werewolf. There was simply no other explanation for him looking like a walking beast. Or his bad hygiene.

The man smiled, revealing his jagged, yellow teeth. He slowly raised his wand, and he and Bronson began dueling. It was not long before Bronson was knocked onto his back with a crowd of Voldemort's followers standing above him. The beast-man laughed.

"*Avada Ke* -"

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

Someone beat him to the punch and he fell over dead. Well, so much for the epic battle with the hideous man Bronson had planned. He looked up just in time to see Quigley blast the last few people out of the way. Everyone Bronson had bound was already dead.

"Honestly, Bronson, we practically lived in that basement with Malfoy for the last few months, *how* are you this bad at dueling?"

Quigley held out his hand and Bronson grabbed it, letting his oldest friend pull him to his feet. The moment he was up, he hugged him. "I don't know," he said. "Nothing you do can really prepare you for this." He paused. "What are you doing back here?"

"Do you really think I'm such an arse that I can just run off while you're all over here fighting? That hurts, mate. That really, really hurts."

"Well, to be fair, you *were* acting like an arse," said Bronson, pulling away from him. "Why in fucking hell would you ever make a deal with -?"

"I was desperate," interrupted Quigley. "They killed Jenna, they threatened Fiona, and I didn't want to put you in danger by telling you. A lot of good that did." He chuckled halfheartedly. "I'm sorry. I was never going to leave Draco and Hermione behind, but I wanted to get Fiona out first. It was a mistake."

Bronson closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You're damn right it was. But I'll punish you for it later. Theo -"

"He's fine," said Quigley, pointing.

Bronson looked over to see Blaise and Daphne helping him duel his father.

"I recruited a couple others on my way over here. They were more than happy to help. After each of them took a swing at me, that is." He pointed at his swollen nose.

Just then, a familiar wizard walked by the two of them, searching the battlefield frantically for something. Or someone. They both pursed their eyebrows.

"Gideon?" said Bronson.

Gideon turned, his eyes focusing as he looked at them. "Hey! If it isn't my two best customers! Don't go dying on me now? I need the business." He laughed. Bronson and Quigley did not laugh with him.

"What are you doing here?" asked Bronson. "Or rather, *how* did you get here?"

"By train," said Gideon, still looking around for someone.

"Train?" repeated Quigley. "As in the Hogwarts fucking Express?"

"Right, that one. You two wouldn't happen to know where McGonagall is, do you?"

Pansy turned at the sound of Gideon's voice. She crinkled her forehead, distracted only for a split second, but it was enough time for a Death Eater to knock her hard on her arse. She raised her wand.

"*Expelliarmus*!"

It went flying.

Pansy tried to roll out of the way, but the Death Eater cast a spell that broke the arm she rolled onto. She cried out in pain. Then he broke her leg.

"Parkinson!"

Ron tried to run to her, but three Snatchers bombarded him.

The Death Eater stood over Pansy and pointed his wand at her heart. She did not know him personally, but he was in Voldemort's inner circle.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he said with a wicked smile.

A light shot out of his wand and Pansy cringed. But it was not the Killing Curse. She looked to see that her wrists and ankles were now bound. The Death Eater's smile widened as several others surrounded them, blocking them from view. He began to undo his trousers.

"No!"

Pansy tried to shuffle out of there, but the Death Eater fell to his knees and held her in place. "Don't worry, blood traitor. I promise I'll kill you right after. Maybe even during."

Pansy kicked him in the groin and he slapped her hard across the face. Then he grabbed her hips and pulled her close.

"No!"

"Yes, blood traitor!" He laughed.

She kicked him again. "Fuck you! I said no! No!"

"NO!"

Pansy's eyes grew wide as she realized the last scream had not come from her. Suddenly, everyone was dropping dead around them.

"What the -?"

The Death Eater stood up just in time to see his murderer point his wand and shout, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

He fell flat at Pansy's feet.

Pansy sat up, her heart stopping as she looked up at her savior.

"Pan-sy."

Her father fell down to his knees in front of her. He touched her face, noticing the wound from where the Death Eater had smacked her. He lifted his wand. *Her* wand. She quickly snatched it with her bound wrists.

"No!" she snapped. "You should *not* have one of these!"

Her father nodded. He leaned in and hugged onto her, accidentally agitating her injured arm. She cried out.

Suddenly, Ron was beside her and shoving her father out of the way. He took one look at her arm, then used his wand to snap it back into place.

"OW! FUCK!" She used her good arm to smack him hard on the head.

Her father yelled out in anger and was about to smack Ron too, but Pansy quickly stopped him.

"No, no! It's fine! He's helping me! See?" She wiggled her arm to show him it was better. Stuart smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

"The leg's no good," said Ron, barely noticing the exchange. "You'll need someone who actually knows what they're doing to fix it."

"Oh, you bloody think so?"

Ron ignored her tone and scooped her into his arms. He stood up with Stuart watching Pansy closely the entire time.

Pansy kept her face hidden in Ron's shoulder. If any of Voldemort's followers saw that she was still alive then they were sure to come after her. But then she saw Gideon, still standing with Bronson and Quigley and, now, McGonagall and Kingsley.

"Gideon!" she called.

Gideon turned, his eyes growing wide when he saw her. "Merlin, Pansy, what happened?"

"I'm fine," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"He brought reinforcements," answered Bronson. "On the bloody Hogwarts Express!"

"Really?" said Pansy, her eyes lighting up. "Where are they?"

"I've been sent ahead," said Gideon. "Because half of them … well, they can't get in."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because Muggles are forbidden," Kingsley said sternly. "I am sorry, but we cannot allow them -"

"Why not?" snapped Gideon. "Wizards and witches aren't exactly a secret to them anymore! They're here and they want to fight! This is *not* just our war anymore! You-Know-Who has destroyed their world too!"

"It is not that simple," said McGonagall. "Besides, Muggle weapons do not even work on these grounds. They will be unable to -"

"Maybe not guns and grenades, but we have been teaching the Muggles living in the Underground how to use swords, axes, spears, and bows for years. Haven't we, Pansy?"

Pansy looked at McGonagall and nodded. "Yes, we have. So they would be able to protect themselves since the Dark Lord put up a similar shield around London. They know how to fight."

Kingsley took a deep breath. "This is suicide."

"And they're all willing to take the risk," said Gideon.

Kingsley and McGonagall looked at each other. She shrugged and he sighed.

"We're not winning," said Bronson. "Just take a look around."

They both did. It was true. While they might not have been losing, there was no

clear victor at this point in time. And Voldemort was still fighting strong, killing everyone he could while Draco kept him distracted.

"Fine," said Kingsley. "Minerva, go with him and release the spell to let the Muggles in. But send the wizards and witches in now."

Gideon beamed at him. "You won't regret this, Mr. Shacklebolt. I promise."

"See that I don't," said Kingsley before returning to the battlefield.

Gideon turned to leave but Ron called him back. "Take her with you," he said, holding Pansy out to him.

"What?" she snapped, clinging hard onto his neck as Gideon tried to pull her away. "No! You can't! I want to stay! I want to fight! I -"

"You're fucking hurt, Parkinson!" shouted Ron. "You can't walk, and I can't bloody carry you the entire time! You need to get out of here before one of You-Know-Who's followers realizes you're still alive!"

"But -"

"No buts! Just go!"

Ron practically threw her into Gideon's arms. Then he ran back into the crowd, quickly disappearing from her sight.

"Don't worry, Pansy, we brought some Healers with us," said Gideon as he carried her away with McGonagall and Stuart at his heels. "You'll be back out there before you know it."

Ron ran through the battlefield, protecting himself from all spells fired in his direction. He could see Ginny now. Only a few yards ahead and still battling Greyback with Harry. The area in front of him cleared.

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

Greyback dodged. He rolled on the ground, came to a skidding stop and looked up at Ron, his teeth salivating as he growled like the beast he was. It was only then that he noticed the small figure in the distance, running like mad as a flaming serpent chased her. Hermione.

Greyback came for him, charging on all fours and ready to bite even though he was not in his wolf form. Harry waved his wand and sent Greyback flying away.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" shouted Ginny, running after him.

But, before she got there, someone beat her to it. Ginny stopped and watched as her father suddenly grabbed Greyback by the neck and held his dangling body high in the air.

"This is for my daughter," he said almost calmly. Greyback struggled, but it was no use. Arthur touched his wand to the man's chest, tossed him away from the battlefield and shouted, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

By the time Greyback landed, he was dead. And the moment Ron knew his sister was all right, he took off running.

"Ron!" he heard Harry shout behind him. But he did not care. This time he was not going to leave her behind. Whether they won or lost, they would do it together. *All* of them.

Harry wanted to run after him, but he knew he could not put off his battle with Voldemort any longer.

While his legs were still not very strong, Harry did not feel weak in that moment. He ran towards the Dark Lord, feeling as light as he ever had. The moment he got there, he locked eyes with Draco. They both nodded.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" shouted Harry.

Voldemort turned to duel him and Draco took off running after Ron and Hermione. The Dark Lord tried to stop him, but Ginny stepped in his path. There would be no more distractions. It was time to finish this.

Hermione could not remember a time when she had ever run so hard. She turned every few steps, trying some different variations of Freezing Charms she knew, but nothing worked. The damn thing had not slowed. Not even a little.

She began searching her brain, trying to come up with some sort of plan. Closing her eyes, Hermione let the words from her books consume her. They danced around in her head until, finally, she found something. In *Hogwarts: A History*, of course! How had she not thought of it before?

It was believed that Black Lake held magical properties in its water. Not just Healing Magic but Protective Magic, as well. It was a longshot but, if this was true, then there just might be a chance that it would be powerful enough to destroy fiendfyre.

With no other options, Hermione swiveled on her foot and took off in the direction of the lake. The serpent stayed faithfully on her heels, and she could hear someone in the distance screaming her name. But she did not have time to look back. Her lungs were already aching and she could not take much more of this.

The lake came into view and, without another thought, she jumped right into it, diving deep and hoping this would be enough to destroy the fiendfyre.

The water was freezing and hit her like a million tiny daggers. But, still, she swam, deeper and farther, afraid to look back even though she knew she had to. So she did, immediately noticing the red flames still burning over her shoulder. The serpent had followed her, and it was still going strong.

Hermione felt her body going numb. She never thought it was going to end like this, alone and cornered in a lake, but here she was. Out of ideas with no visible means of escape.

Something began tugging at her legs and she looked down to see several Grindylows grabbing at her. She tried to kick them off, so they pulled her deeper.

While Hermione knew the end was near, she could not bring herself to stop fighting. She clawed at the Grindylows, yanking them off of her and successfully pushing one away. It landed on the serpent's face and instantly burned into nothing.

The other Grindylows forgot about Hermione and swam after their new foe. Unfortunately, it was not long before they were all gone.

More appeared out of nowhere. Hermione took this time to swim away, but her breath was getting short and she could no longer feel her frozen arms and legs. But, still, she tried, her eyes going dark as she fought for her life, trying so hard to reach the surface.

As everything began to fade around her, suddenly she felt something wrap around her waist. An arm. She opened her eyes just enough to see a streak of red hair flow in front of her eyes.

Ron struggled hard to carry Hermione towards the surface. He got them up and swam towards land. Draco was already in the lake with the water up to his knees. The moment he saw them emerge, he hurried towards them, taking Hermione from Ron as he struggled to get back to his feet.

But, before Ron could stand completely, something grabbed onto his ankles and

pulled him back under.

"Weasel!"

Draco carefully put Hermione on the bank before diving in after Ron. The lake was dark and he cast '*Lumos*' on his wand to be able to see properly. The Grindylows cowered at the sight of the light. He followed them until he reached the red flames, the Grindylows bringing Ron towards the fiendfyre like a sacrifice. Only, he was not the one the serpent wanted.

Draco cast several spells at the Grindylows, forcing them to let Ron go. He grabbed him. The fiendfyre quickly burned the last of the Grindylows and rushed after them. But something grabbed it and the serpent was tossed away from them. Draco held out his wand and could just make out one giant eye. He nodded in thanks to the squid and swam as hard as he could towards the surface.

When they got to the shore, Hermione was coughing up water. Draco lay Ron down next to her. She gasped when she noticed he was unconscious, and used a spell to zap the water out of his lungs. Then she cast it again and he woke up, choking.

There was a loud hissing sound and they all turned towards the water. A bright red light was swimming towards them, the serpent's head poking in and out of the water to keep sight of them.

Draco got behind Hermione and held her wand hand in his. He began waving it through the motions of the spell. "Repeat after me, love."

She nodded.

"*Glacio -*"

"*Glacio -*"

The serpent leapt out of the water, mouth open and screeching.

"- *Emorior* !"

"- *Emorior* !"

Blue flames shot out of Hermione's wand and engulfed the serpent. It let out a horrible cry as it extinguished to nothing, not even a trace of ash left behind.

Hermione began to shiver as Draco wrapped his arms around her. "I thought I was

finished," she said in a shaky voice. She whimpered. "Thank you, Ron. For coming after me."

Ron smiled weakly as his own body began to shake. "You know I would never leave you behind."

Draco cast a spell on all of them to dry their clothes and warm their bodies. He did not do it perfectly, that would take time, but he at least got them warm enough to function again.

"We need to head back," he said, pulling Hermione with him as he stood up. "This isn't over yet."

Ron and Hermione both nodded. The three of them began running towards the battlefield, knowing very well that it would not be long now. In a matter of moments, the war would be over, and someone would be victorious.

As they ran across the grounds, several shadows suddenly engulfed them. Hermione looked up and gasped. There, flying above their heads, were Thestrals, Hippogriffs, a golden phoenix and - she could have sworn - one small blackbird, heading towards the battlefield and swooping down, attacking the enemy. It was only then that she noticed the Thestrals and Hippogriffs had people flying on their backs.

Several shouts and cheers echoed from across the grounds. Suddenly, there were dozens of people running in from the gate leading to Hogsmeade. Some had wands, but the majority came in with swords, axes and spears raised. Muggles.

Theo and his father paused their duel to watch the masses come stampeding onto the battlefield. While many of the Muggles fell easily, the others fought hard, taking down any Death Eater they could get their hands on. They knew those robes.

"This is for my family!" one of them shouted.

"For our world!" yelled another one.

"This is bloody ridiculous," said Quincy, turning back towards his son. "Theo, drop the girl so we can finish this."

Theo readjusted Hannah on his back.

"Here, give her to me, Theo," said Daphne.

She hurried over and had just put her hands on Hannah's when a powerful blast

sent them all flying.

"Daphne!" shouted Blaise, running over and trying to get her out from underneath Theo.

Quincy had been knocked backwards, as well, but, as he sat up, he caught sight of someone also struggling to get up again. His eyes narrowed.

"You're still *alive*?" he spat.

Quincy hurried to his feet and pointed his wand at Bronson, who was currently rubbing at his aching head. He stopped, his eyes suddenly widening.

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

Bronson got out of the way just in time.

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

Quincy ducked as a Killing Curse shot at him. He turned and saw the Mudblood traitor standing behind him.

"This does not concern you, Mudblood!"

Finding himself overcome with a horrible rage, Quincy fired a string of curses at Quigley. They came so quickly that the other wizard could not do much more than protect himself. Then Quincy sent a blast of fire at him.

Quigley leapt out of the way, but the spell still hit his leg. "AH!" He cried out in pain as he landed hard on the ground. His eyes were blurry but he still managed to look down at the damage. The flesh had been completely scorched off. He nearly fainted at the sight of blood and bone.

"Quigs!"

Bronson tried to run for him, but Quincy held out his wand to stop him. "Your turn, Mudblood."

The two of them began to duel.

Theo's eyes widened in fear as his entire body began to shake. "Get her off me!" he shouted.

Daphne had just crawled out from underneath him and was trying to remove the

spell Theo had cast on Hannah's hands.

"Get her off me! Get her off me! Get her *fucking* off me!"

"I'm trying, Theo!" snapped Daphne.

Finally, the spell released and Theo scrambled to his feet. He ran towards his father. "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Quincy stepped out of the Killing Curse's way. "Does he mean that much to you, Theo?" he asked, looking at his son and pouting. "In that case, I suppose you should watch him die. Or vice versa, I don't really care."

Killing Curses, Cruciatus Curses, Hexes and blasts of all kinds began firing left and right, the snow all but vanishing beneath their feet as the heat of it all burned the air around them. But, while Quincy was angry, he did not have the same fire as his son, and he was still thinking rationally, not to mention tactically. Theo was aiming to kill, but Quincy was not quite ready to give up on his bloodline. Once the Dark Lord had won, he would be willing to reconsider. So there was only the matter of disposing of the nuisance.

"*Expelliarmus*!" he shouted.

Bronson's wand flew out of his hand. Theo was about to levitate it back to him when Quincy held out his arm and Theo went flying into it.

"You'll want to watch this, Theo."

It was only then that Theo realized he could not move. Somehow, his father had frozen him. Quincy left Theo standing there while he went after a wandless Bronson.

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

Bronson dodged the spell.

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

He dodged again.

Quigley was struggling to drag himself towards the duel. "Bronson!" he called, but his friend was too distracted to hear him.

Blaise tried to attack Quincy while Daphne worked on waking Hannah but, with a

simple wave of Quincy's wand, he was sent flying, a force hitting his gut so hard that it knocked the wind out of him.

"BRONSON!" Quigley called again.

Hermione and Draco stopped on the other side of the battlefield when they heard Quigley's screams. They both looked to see Theo standing there frozen while Quincy shot Killing Curse after Killing Curse at Bronson. Hermione gasped.

Draco clenched his teeth and pushed her forward. "Go!" he shouted.

"But what about -?"

"I'll help Potter," he said. "You go help them finish that bastard."

Hermione nodded. She wanted to kiss Draco but she knew there was no time. With heavy hearts, they released hands and took off in opposite directions. Draco immediately rejoined the duel between Harry and Voldemort while Hermione ran as fast as her legs would carry her.

She could see Theo struggling even from there. He was trying desperately to remove the spell that was keeping him in place.

Bronson landed hard on the ground as he dodged another Killing Curse.

"Bronson, my wand, my wand! Take my wand!"

He finally looked to see Quigley stretching out towards him. He crawled over.

Hermione had not slowed her pace. She pushed and shoved, her head spinning and her heart beating fast. There was a break in the crowd and she let out a breath of relief, sending a spell flying forward and hitting Theo spot on. He unfroze.

Bronson grabbed hold of Quigley's wand and hurried to his feet. He aimed the wand at Quincy. "*Ava* -"

Suddenly, Quincy vanished before his eyes. He had not Apparated but, in the shuffle, Bronson had missed him cast a phantom of himself.

"Left! LEFT!" screamed Theo.

Bronson turned left. Quincy had his wand pointed right at his heart.

"*Avada Kedavra*!"

"NOO!"

Theo's cry echoed across the battlefield as Bronson seemed to fall backwards in slow motion. He landed right beside Quigley, who let out a scream even more heartbreaking as he looked into his friend's very dead eyes.

Hermione could feel herself tumbling even before it happened. The whole world suddenly became darker around her as Bronson hit the ground. And she hit it right along with him, her legs no longer working as one of her dearest friend's died right in front of her.

In that moment, Theo went mad. Quincy turned just in time to see his son shoot a horrible blast at him. The Killing Curse was too easy. His father would die, and he would die slowly.

The earth cracked beneath their feet as Theo raged onward. Hermione wanted to help, but she knew she had to stay back. Theo could not even see in that moment, and anyone who got in his crossfire was bound to die as horrifically as his father.

Daphne watched Theo in horror, not even noticing as Hannah's eyes slowly began to open.

Quincy had not been expecting this sort of reaction, and he was forced to defend himself instead of retaliate. But Theo was quicker than him and, when he was still blocking one blast, another one was fired. It hit Quincy in the chest and knocked him to the ground.

His entire body began to convulse as blood gushed from the wound. Theo walked over to his father and stared down at him coldly. Without a word, he lifted his foot and jammed it into his open chest. More blood spurted from Quincy's mouth.

"You disgust me," said Theo, his eyes never leaving his father's as he jammed his foot in deeper. "I hate you. I have always hated you. Any children I may have will not be named Nott. You can be damn sure of that. Your bloodline dies here. With you."

Theo twisted his foot around the inside of his father's chest. Quincy's head shot up. He let out one last horrible cry of pain before falling back and ceasing all movement.

The moment his father was gone, Theo removed his foot. Looking down at the man lying dead before him, his eyes stopped being cold and became sad. Tears

filled them as he turned away, not seeing very well through his blurry vision, but following Quigley's cries to find his way to Bronson. He collapsed beside him, his heart cracking as he refused to look at his face. But he had to. He had to know if this was real. So he looked. And that was the moment his heart broke completely.

Theo slowly reached out his shaky hand to touch Bronson's cheek. He pulled it away before making contact, then urged his fingers forward until they were feeling his cold skin. He looked into Bronson's muddy-green eyes one last time before shutting them.

A soft hand touched Theo's shoulder. He tried to push them off but they held on tight. He looked over to see Hermione kneeling beside him, crying hard as she gazed at their friend lying in front of them.

Theo, Hermione and Quigley were all too distracted to notice when Quincy's hand began to twitch. It reached out, searching the ground for his wand. When he finally touched wood, his fingers began to close around it, but then someone kicked it away. He slowly opened his eyes, only to find a girl standing above him. The same one who had been strapped to Theo's back for all that time.

The two of them gazed at each other for a moment. Then, without a word, she pointed her wand at his chest and whispered, "*Avada Kedavra*." This was Theo's kill, and she would not have him ever believing otherwise. She looked over her shoulder at Daphne, who nodded in understanding.

Across the battlefield, Draco could not see what was happening, but he knew in his gut that something terrible had happened. He tried to look, but Voldemort shot another Killing Curse at him and he was forced to dodge.

"Your mind is distracted, Draco," said the Dark Lord. "I will not kill you like this. Show me your true strength."

Draco turned his eyes to Voldemort.

"You have given this Mudblood too much power over you. Have you forgotten what I taught you? Love makes people weak, Draco. Never forget that."

"No," said Draco, once again lifting his wand. "You're wrong. Love has not made me weak. It is true that if Hermione was here I would choose to protect her over myself, but that does not make me weak. Loving her, and having her love in return has given me something to fight for. I have only become stronger since she entered my life. Not weaker. While you … you become weaker every day. You may not even realize it, but you *let* the betrayals of your followers consume you.

Their lack of love for you, *my* lack of love for you drives you mad, and you are willing to kill just to hold onto it. You kill those who you feel are weak or inferior in place of those you consider strongest. Like me. How many times have you killed another of your followers for my mistakes?"

Voldemort smiled in amusement. "Are you saying that I 'love' you, Draco?"

"In your own twisted way, yes," said Draco. "And Bellatrix. You would not be this angry with me now if you didn't. She meant something to you. Even now, do you really want to kill me? If so, you're not trying very hard."

Voldemort raised what should have been his eyebrows on his pasty forehead. "You are right. With Bellatrix gone, I will need a new second in command. And you are the only one who has proven yourself strong enough for the task. You will not die today, Draco. But Harry Potter will, along with everyone else fighting for him today, including your Mudblood."

Draco's hand tensed around his wand. "No. She won't."

Harry had been standing a few feet from Draco, but once the other wizard nodded in his direction he knew it was time. Draco lowered his wand and stepped back.

A crowd of people had already formed around them and were edging forward. Harry lifted his hand and everyone on his side halted. "I don't want anyone else to try to help," he said in a booming voice. "Just like before, it's got to be like this. It's got to be me."

Voldemort laughed. "Eerie, isn't it? Almost like an echo from the past."

Harry looked at him coldly. "Neither can live while the other survives, remember? We have fought fate for too long. And, now, one of us is about to leave for good …"

Voldemort's followers were still edging forward, but he lifted his hand and they all stopped.

The entire battlefield grew silent as Voldemort and Harry began circling one another. Harry's eyes fell upon the Elder Wand in Voldemort's hand.

"Is it working better for you now?" he asked. "Since the last time we met, that is."

Voldemort smiled. "Why, of course. I am its one true master."

"Yes, I suppose you disarmed me during our last battle. So I can no longer rely on

it protecting me."

"No clever tricks up your sleeve, Potter? No words of wisdom as you ramble on about how you are so much cleverer than I? About how love is the strongest magic of all and how I should cower in its presence?"

"It *is* the strongest magic," said Harry. "But that is no secret. Do you think there is even one person here today fighting for my side that is not doing it for someone they love? For a brighter future for their children, or in honor of someone they have lost? Love brought us all here today, even the man who you believed to be your coldest follower."

"Yes, Draco loves a Mudblood," said Voldemort. "I've gathered that already."

Suddenly, Harry stopped walking and stood with his wand pointed at Voldemort. "I have no tricks today, Voldemort, but the love I have inside of me will make me victorious. And *that* is one thing I am sure of."

Voldemort breathed in heavily through his snake-like nostrils. "Very well. Have it your way, Potter."

Both of their wands raised, and the two wizards paused for only the briefest of moments before they were both shouting, "*Avada Kedavra*!"

Their spells collided, both of equal strength and fighting for a moment before shooting back at their casters. They both dodged.

Voldemort fired another Killing Curse, but Harry tried something different. A spell he had read about but never had the chance to cast. A large gust of black smoke formed and hurled itself at the Dark Lord, who barely had enough time to shield himself before it surrounded him like a black bubble. The smoke shot outwards and everyone watching from the sidelines ducked. Voldemort stood in the center, untouched. Harry grunted.

Hermione felt the battle grow more powerful as the ground began to shake beneath her. The area around them had all but cleared out, and she had just finished healing Quigley's leg as best she could. But now she slowly stood, her eyes scanning the crowd for any flash of platinum blond hair, but she saw nothing.

"I'm going back for Draco," she said, looking down at Quigley. "Will you be all right?"

Quigley nodded since his throat was too raw to speak.

Hermione headed towards the battle, putting her hand on Theo's shoulder as she passed him. To her surprise, he grabbed onto it, holding her in place while he stood.

"I'm coming with you."

Hermione nodded and the two of them hurried towards where they knew Draco would be.

Draco was still on the sidelines. He glanced around at everyone standing there in a trance-like state. Sitting ducks. He found Ron amidst all of the people and motioned towards some Death Eaters standing right beside him.

Ron nodded. He whispered to some resistance members around him and, before the Death Eaters knew what was happening, they all dropped dead.

Soon, the entire battle recommenced. A Death Eater came for Ron, but Lucy jumped in his way and ended up getting hit with a Killing Curse. Cormac cried out when he saw, but that only made him fight harder. Many Muggles were still fighting, sticking their weapons into as many Death Eaters, Snatchers and Werewolves as they could. Luna Lovegood was running around and putting a floating star over all of their enemies' heads so that the Muggles would know who to attack, since many of Voldemort's followers had begun taking off their robes in an attempt to trick them.

The battle raged on, and Draco soon found himself in a battle with Ginny and two Death Eaters. Fawkes, the phoenix, even joined in at one point, pecking at one of the Death Eater's heads.

Even as Draco fought, he made sure to stay close to Harry. Just in case.

One of the Death Eaters cast a spell that sent Ginny flying towards Harry. She landed hard just beside him. He turned.

"Ginny!"

Without thinking, Harry ran to the aid of his girlfriend, putting him directly between Voldemort and Draco.

The entire world slowed as Draco watched Voldemort raise his wand, his mouth slowly forming the words of a curse that could very well kill Harry.

"DRACO!"

He heard *her* voice call his name through the crowd. The people around him faded into nothing but faceless blurs until there was only her. Hermione. Standing in the middle of the battle with her amber eyes on him. Even through this chaos, he could still see it. Their future. A life where they were free to be together, and happy. Where they could get married and have children, raising them to not hate and fear those who were different from them, but love and embrace them. Like he had with her.

But then that beautiful future melted away, and all Draco saw was darkness. If the Dark Lord won and they were captured then he would be enslaved and Hermione … she would be killed. And he could not bear the thought of a world without her.

The world still moving so incredibly slow, Draco watched as Harry turned in a panic towards Voldemort.

As much as it pained Draco to admit it, he knew Hermione could be happy in a world without him. It might take some time, but she would get there. Her life … her freedom … that was the most important thing to him. A life with Hermione was nothing without her freedom, and he wanted her to have it. Even if it meant sacrificing himself. For the greater good.

Draco felt his arm move, still in slow motion but starting to speed up again. And, by the time it was pointed at Harry, it all caught up to him. He cast a spell, throwing Harry out of the way and putting himself in the crossfire of Voldemort's oncoming curse. Red flames shot out of his wand, hitting Draco right over his already broken heart.

"NO!"

Draco knew the horrible scream even without seeing the face of the person who had released it.

Harry stumbled back to his feet. He took one look at Draco before glaring at the Dark Lord and shouting, "*AVADA KEDAVRA*!" at the top of his lungs.

Voldemort did the same. Only, this time they were not evenly matched. While Harry may not have loved Draco, he loved Hermione, and knowing his slipup had just caused someone she loved to sacrifice himself like that, that was enough to bring out the real fire burning inside of him.

Their spells still wrestled for control, but Harry's green jet was quickly pushing Voldemort's back. And, before long, both spells were shooting at him, the green light flying high into the sky as Voldemort fell backwards, his scarlet slits rolling

back into his eyelids and going white. He hit the floor with his arms spread wide and Harry was left standing there, staring down at the vacant shell of the monster he had finally destroyed.

Everyone cheered. Voldemort's followers who were still left tried to flee, but all were either killed or bound. Soon, Harry was surrounded by a roaring crowd, but he felt little joy as he watched Hermione push through them all, not stopping until she was by Draco's side and cradling his head in her lap. No, there was no joy here. Not when someone he cared about so much looked so sad as the man she loved lay dying in her arms.

"Draco! Draco, please! Stay with me!"

"Her … Hermi …"

"Yes, yes, it's me!" said Hermione, rubbing her fingers tenderly across his cheek.

"Dammit, Malfoy, no!"

Hermione looked up to see Padma collapse by his side. She immediately went to work trying to heal the wound on his chest, but it was of little use. It was too large, too deep. No amount of magic she used would be able to save him now.

"Ernie did not give his life so you could die now!"

Theo stood beside Hermione, his entire body shaking as he lowered himself to his knees. He followed Draco's body up until he was looking into his eyes.

"T-take c-care of her, The … Theo."

Theo shook his head. "No. You do it."

"I …"

"Draco, please," Hermione cried. "Please, don't die on me now. I need you."

"Y-you don't -" *Cough* - "need me, Her … Herm … ione. You will be … f-fine."

"Fuck, Malfoy!" Ron dropped to his knees beside him.

"If T-Theo f-fucking won't … then W-Weasel -"

"No one is going to fucking take care of me but you, Draco!" shouted Hermione. She grabbed his hand and entwined it with hers, showing him the ring she still

wore before placing them beside his damaged heart. "Please …"

It was becoming hard for Draco to keep his eyes open, but he did not want to go just yet. He wanted to keep looking at her. "Hermione … I love you …"

Everything began to darken, but he was not sure if his vision was becoming hazy or his eyes were closing.

"Draco, no!" Hermione began to shake him. "No, no, please! Draco, please! Don't leave me!"

As Draco felt himself drifting away, he suddenly heard singing that seemed to be floating above him. His mind automatically filled in the words of 'Blackbird' as he listened.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*
*Take these sunken eyes and learn to see*
*All your life*
*You were only waiting for this moment to be free*

Draco's darkened eyes suddenly became light again, and he could see for only a moment. Just long enough to watch the silhouette of a magnificent bird descend upon him.

**A/N: Don't kill me! *cowers as Bronson/Theo shippers throw rocks at me***

**Sorry guys, but I knew Bronson was going to die pretty much from the moment I created his character. Believe me, you are not the only ones who are upset. I HATED writing that scene, even cried a little, but it had to happen. Not everyone can make it out alive.**

**But I am flattered that so many of you loved my OC almost as much as the actual characters (maybe some of you even loved him a little more). Hopefully, you will understand and not hunt me down and kill me.**

**And as for Draco … one more chapter, right? ;o)**

# Chapter 50: Here Comes the Sun

**A/N: Wow. That is all I have to say to the amount of response I received for the last chapter. I know I should be upset that so many of you are angry at me, but I'm not. The fact that a character I created touched so many people so much is really just an honor. After all, that is the goal of a writer, isn't it? To evoke emotion in our readers.**

**Thank you everyone for sticking with me through this incredibly long and emotional story. I still can't believe CaBW is over 400,000 words. "Inconceivable!" The amount of positive response I have received has been amazing.**

**But, alas, it is time for our journey to end …**

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Draco laid very still as soft music continued to play in his ears. While his hands remained firmly by his sides, he could not feel any floor. It was almost as if he was floating. A bright light shined behind his eyelids, forcing him to keep them closed. But then there was a click, followed by the familiar smell of cigarette smoke. Someone inhaled, then breathed out slowly. He was not alone.

Draco was slow to open his eyes, the bright light blinding him for a moment. He blinked several times, his hands clenching and suddenly grabbing sheets. Those had not been there before. Draco turned his head and saw a man sitting on a windowsill while his eyes gazed at something beyond the glass, but all Draco could see was a blinding white light. The man turned. He smiled.

"Rise and shine, mate."

"Bronson … where are we?"

Bronson shrugged. "Dunno exactly." He looked back out the window. "But it sure is bright."

"What happened?" asked Draco. "Where's Hermione?"

"Not here, thank Merlin," answered Bronson.

Suddenly, so many things were flashing through Draco's mind. The Dark Lord. A war. Potter. A spell. Hermione. And a pain. A horrible, horrible pain. Draco brought his hand up to his chest. Nothing. There was no pain, no wound.

"Bronson … where are we?" he asked again, tears filling his eyes as he looked

desperately at his friend.

Bronson turned back around but he did not answer. Just took another drag of his cigarette.

"*Where*-are-we?" he demanded.

Bronson sighed. He motioned straight ahead. Draco looked, his tears spilling over as he saw it for the first time. There, right in front of him, was an archway covered by a tattered black veil. *The* Veil.

"No!"

Draco leapt out of his bed and took several steps away from it.

"I … I've been here before," he suddenly remembered. "I saw my mother here. She said it was not my time. She *promised* it was not my time."

And then Draco stopped. Frozen. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths.

"Bronson … I remember why I'm here, but you … why are *you* here?"

He heard Bronson sigh deeply. "Because I died, mate."

Draco's throat felt like it had been stripped from the inside out. He gulped to try and release the tension, but it only made it worse. His heart ached as he stared at Bronson with wet eyes. "How?"

Bronson stood up from the windowsill. "Theo's father got me."

"But that's impossible. Hermione went to -"

"She didn't get there in time. She tried, and so did Theo and Quigley, but the man wanted me dead. S'alright though. Theo avenged me, and he looked damn sexy doing it." He smirked.

"It's not funny," said Draco. He drew his eyes down to Bronson's cigarette. "Where did you get that?"

Bronson looked down at it and shrugged. "I don't know. I just kind of thought about how nice it would be to have one and poof! There it was." He brought it up to his lips and took another drag. "Oh, sweet nicotine."

"How can you be all right with this?" asked Draco, suddenly feeling angry as he stood there watching Bronson smoke. "This wasn't supposed to happen. You were supposed to make it. You were supposed to be there for Hermione when I died! You were supposed to take care of her, you fucking bastard!"

Draco meant to lunge forward and hit him, but his knees felt weak and collapsed to them instead, cradling his arms around his body and crying hysterically as he thought of Hermione somewhere out there. Alone.

"Is that really your only concern? I tell you I'm dead and all you can think about is how I won't be there for someone that is alive."

Draco closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. "No, I … I'm sorry," he cried. "You were always there for me, Bronson. For years, you and Quigley were the only things keeping me sane. I never said it but you … you were my friend. *Are* my friend. I never wanted you to die. Whenever I envisioned my and Hermione's future, you were always in it. You're not supposed to be here. You're supposed to be with her. You're supposed to be happy."

Bronson sighed. He stepped forward and kneeled down beside him. "Draco, I'm fine. As pathetic as it may seem, those nights we spent in your flat; you, me, Hermione, Theo, Quigs … *those* were the happiest moments of my life. My father hated me. He abused me physically and mentally, and my mother did nothing about it. But the four of you … you were the closest I ever got to having a family, and I wouldn't trade that for anything."

Draco nodded. Tears were still falling heavily from his closed eyes. A gentle but firm hand touched his shoulder.

"Draco … listen. Tell me what you hear."

Keeping his eyes closed, Draco held back his sobs and opened his ears. At first, all he found was dead, cold silence. But then a soft, familiar voice entered his head.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*
*Take these broken wings and learn to fly*
*All your life*
*You were only waiting for this moment to arise.*

Warm fingers entwined with his own.

*"Come back to me, Draco."*

And then there were lips, tender and delicate as they brushed against his.

Draco lifted his tingling hand and touched it to them. "What is this?"

And then he felt it. A horrible, throbbing pain burning in his chest. His wound. He could not see it but, somehow, he knew it was still there.

"Hermione, I … I can hear you. I can feel you. I'm … I'm alive." His eyes shot open. "I'm alive!"

Draco nearly fell back when he saw that someone new was crouched down in front of him. Someone so familiar and beautiful. She smiled.

"Yes, my son," said Narcissa as she reached out and stroked his cheek. "I promised you it was not your time yet. Not until you have lived your life properly with the one who makes you happy."

"Mother! But … how can I be alive? I didn't see the veil the last time I was here with you. I'm closer to it. I can feel it tugging at my soul. It wants me to go through."

"You are alive, Draco, but barely," said a deep, drawling voice.

Draco looked up to see his father standing behind his mother.

"Your heart is weak. They have done all they can in the land of the living. It is up to you to decide what happens next."

"I … I can go back? I can be with Hermione?"

"Of course you can," said Narcissa with a smile.

Draco leaned into her touch. His eyes closed again as he slowly began to shake his head. "No. I can't go back. I can't be selfish when it comes to her any longer. She deserves better than me. She -"

"Oh, stop with the whiny bullshit!"

Draco opened his eyes and looked over to see Bronson sitting on the windowsill again. He gulped. "I don't deserve her."

"Says who?" asked Bronson.

"No one has to say anything," answered Draco. "I've done horrible things in my life. Things I can never be forgiven for."

"*Says who*?" Bronson repeated.

Narcissa used her hand on Draco's cheek to make him look at her once more. "Draco, you were willing to give your life so that she and everyone else could have a better future. You're a hero. No one knows that more than her."

"But -"

"No buts," Narcissa said sternly. "*You* have become a great man, Draco Malfoy. And you deserve a great future with the one you love."

Draco drew his eyes over to Bronson once more. He no longer had a cigarette in his hand, but was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his eyes on the floor. He looked up and met Draco's gaze.

"What about you? You were here waiting for me. You can go back and -"

Bronson smirked, but there was little joy behind it. "No, Draco, I can't. There is no coming back from the way I died. I was only waiting here to say goodbye."

Silent tears slipped down Draco's cheeks. "You keep calling me that. Draco. You've never called me that before."

Bronson smirked again. This time, his face shining with that light Draco had become so accustomed to. "Only because you *forbade* me and Quigs from ever using your given name the first time we met. Don't you remember?"

Draco frowned. "Vaguely."

Bronson chuckled. But then he stopped. His eyes drew over to the veil. They grew wet as he continued to gaze at it. "They're calling me back," he said. "My time is up here."

Narcissa continued to stroke Draco's cheek. "Ours is too."

She and Draco slowly stood.

"But … I don't want you to go." Draco's eyes fell on his father. "Any of you."

"We have to, my son," said Narcissa, crying as she pulled him into her arms. "But we will *always* be with you. And Hermione."

"I love you, Mother," said Draco, hugging her back.

"I love you too."

Narcissa forced herself to let go, moving out of the way so Lucius could step forward.

"We will all be together again, Draco. Someday. When it finally is your time, we will be here waiting for you."

Draco nodded, surprising even himself when he threw his arms around his father, hugging him for the first time in years. And he held on, not wanting to let him go.

"I am sorry I ever hurt you, Son."

"I know," said Draco. "And I forgive you, too."

Lucius sobbed into Draco's ear before slowly pulling away.

Draco looked over to see Bronson standing again, nervously gazing out the window. He walked over and stood beside him.

"They say when you wake up after dancing on the edge of the veil that you don't remember anything. Or, if you do, that it just feels like some distant dream." Bronson took a deep breath. "But, by the chance that you will remember this, even just a little, please tell Theo that …" He closed his eyes and sighed. "That I'm sorry we didn't get more time. To figure out what it was we had."

"I will try to remember."

Bronson nodded. He opened his eyes. "I have never fallen for anyone like that before. I really thought that he might be it." With a smile, he added, "Is it horrible that I almost hope he goes back to women? So he has no means for comparison."

Draco chuckled. "Not at all. If Hermione and I don't work out for any reason, I would much rather she went to women. Actually … I'd be fine with that either way."

Bronson cringed. "Ugh. Straight men." His hands tensed. He held them out in front of them, opening and closing them several times. "The pull is getting stronger." His eyes drifted over to the veil, and then fell back on Draco. "Look, Draco, I know you're angry with Quigley. He made a mistake, he knows he did. Please don't dismiss him so easily. He had one of those good families, the selfless and loving kind, and he lost all of them. We found his mother just after Death Eaters attacked his home. She was alive but barely, and he promised her that he would find Fiona and that he would protect her. I just … I don't want him to be alone."

Draco sighed deeply. "I will try."

Bronson nodded. His wet eyes looked beyond Draco to the veil once more. "I have to go. I know you probably don't want to hear it but … I love you, Draco."

Draco blinked his eyes and let a few more tears fall. He was surprised at how much he liked hearing that. "I love you too, *Baldric*."

Bronson smirked. "Fuck you."

He leaned forward and hugged Draco briefly before hurrying towards the veil. Narcissa and Lucius were already standing beside it.

Bronson turned around one last time and through his tears said, "Never forget me, all right?"

"Impossible."

"And maybe you and Hermione could name one of your little rugrats after me? Since I'm never going to get the chance to be cool Unky Bronson."

Draco smiled softly. "You already know we will."

Bronson nodded. He turned quickly and stepped through the black veil, vanishing from Draco's sight forever.

"We promise we'll take care of him," said Narcissa. "And the others who fought by your side."

"Thank you," said Draco.

"We *will* meet again, Draco," said Lucius. "On the other side."

Draco's heart tensed in his chest as he watched his parents step through the veil, entering a place where he could no longer see them, no longer reach them. Once they were gone, Draco looked out the window. There was still the blinding white light but, this time, he could see three faint figures entering it, joining the others who were already there waiting. Ernie … Astoria … Goyle … they were all there and looked the most at peace he had ever seen them.

Ernie's glowing figure waved. Draco waved back. And then the white light consumed them, taking them all from his sight and to the beyond. It spread outwards, engulfing the room he stood in and vanishing the black veil completely.

Draco closed his eyes and let the white light wrap around him, pulling him out of the veil and into a darker world. Less blinding. And beautiful.

*Blackbird fly, Blackbird fly*
*Into the light of the dark black night.*

*Hermione … you are the light I will always fly to …*

Draco's breathing grew heavier as his eyelids began to flutter. His head throbbed something fierce and there was this horrible pain in his chest, not to mention the heavy one pressing on it.

His eyes opened and the world slowly became clear. His heart jumped when he came face to face with a pair of yellow eyes on a squashed orange head.

Crookshanks purred as he kneaded his chest. Well, that explained the pressing pain. There was a squawking sound and Draco turned, more than a little surprised to see the phoenix, Fawkes, sitting on a perch by the window. Crookshanks hissed at the bird before licking Draco and claiming him as his own.

Draco lifted his hand and rubbed the cat's head. Then he looked to his other side. Theo was there, asleep in a chair and propped up with one hand while Hannah rested her head on his shoulder.

"Hey," called Draco, but his voice came out quiet and dry. He gulped and tried again. "Theo."

Theo stirred and let out a little yawn, but he did not wake up.

"Theo!" Draco said louder.

Theo mumbled something, letting a bit of drool fall out of the corner of his mouth.

Draco looked around. There was a little teddy bear on his nightstand next to some flowers. He picked it up and tossed it at his sleeping friend.

"Theo!"

Theo popped awake with a scream, startling Hannah so much that she fell out of her chair and landed hard on the floor.

"Th'fuck?" said Theo, blinking a few times as he looked around the room.

"What is Mr. Platypus doing on the floor?" asked Hannah, picking up the teddy

bear Draco had thrown.

Draco cocked an eyebrow. "Why the fuck would someone name a bear Mr. Platypus?"

Both Theo and Hannah jumped again. They turned their heads in Draco's direction and stared wide-eyed at him.

"You're … you're awake," muttered Theo.

Suddenly, Hannah shot up from the floor. "Theo, pour him some water!"

Theo stood and struggled with a pitcher on a table while Hannah ran over to the bed. She handed Draco the bear before pulling out her wand and moving Crookshanks to the floor so she could wave it over his chest. When she was finished, she sighed in relief.

"Everything seems okay."

Theo went around to the other side and handed Draco a glass of water. He sat up and chugged the whole thing down, momentarily relieving his horribly dry throat.

While Theo went to pour him some more water, Draco held up the bear to Hannah. "You didn't answer my question."

"Oh …" she said, looking down at Mr. Platypus.

"The kid named him," answered Theo. "Teddy. He and Andromeda brought Mr. Platypus by a few days ago."

"Days?" repeated Draco. "I've been here for *days*?"

Theo and Hannah looked at each other.

"Uhh … something like that," said Theo, walking over and handing Draco the new glass of water.

Draco took a deep breath. "How long, Theo?"

Theo did not answer.

"*How long* have I been here?"

Theo and Hannah looked at each other again. She just shrugged and shook her head.

"Do you mean here specifically or -"

"How long has it fucking been since that son of a bitch blasted my chest open?"

Only now did Draco really feel the extent of the pain inside of it. He looked down to see that he was bandaged, but he could still see little bits of the wound poking out the edges.

"Just over three weeks," Theo finally answered.

Draco's bottom lip dropped. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Shit. "Where are we?" he asked.

"St. Mungo's," answered Hannah. "London was the first city we took back after You-Know-Who's defeat."

Draco opened his eyes and looked at her. "The first?"

Hannah smiled. "Yes. The resistance has been going around, pushing Death Eaters and Snatchers out of towns all over the country. We almost have all of Britain back. Word of our victory is spreading and people all over the world are coming together to fight them off. We helped win back Paris just yesterday."

And, suddenly, the most important question fell from Draco's lips. He had been trying to hold off asking to get more information, but he could not wait any longer. He had to know. "Where is Hermione?"

Hannah's smile faded.

"Where is she?" Draco asked again.

Silence.

"WHERE IS SHE?" Draco attempted to climb out of his bed, but Hannah and Theo pushed him back into place. He was too weak to fight them.

"Draco, calm down, mate!" said Theo. "She's not here. She's in Paris. Potter is supposed to make some uplifting speech there today and he convinced her to go with him. To take her mind off of … things." His eyes glanced briefly at Draco's bandaged chest.

"She's been here every day," said Hannah. "I can't even imagine how upset she's going to be when she finds out you woke up the one time she's gone."

Draco let out a breath of relief. "But she's all right?" he asked. "She hasn't been hurt or -?"

"Of course not," said Hannah. "She wanted to be here with you so she hasn't participated in any of the takeovers. Only organized them. Which is why we've been so successful."

Draco leaned back in his bed and smiled to himself. "Sounds about right."

Just then, Fawkes squawked. Draco glanced over at him. "What's his story?" he asked.

Theo and Hannah followed his gaze. They both smiled.

"He likes you," said Hannah.

"He's *chosen* you," corrected Theo. "The bird's stayed with you ever since he healed your chest, which has Patil absolutely delighted. There are too many injured people for the phoenix to go shedding a tear on everyone, but she's been using the ones he will give to make some powerful potions."

"The phoenix … healed me?" asked Draco.

"Yeah," said Theo. "You were pretty much gone when we saw him coming. And then you were gone, but Patil did some weird shocking spell on you that brought you back and he cried right onto your heart."

"It was beautiful," said Hannah. "But the tear only healed your heart. Your chest was still wide open. Hermione and Padma worked day and night to keep you alive. The first week was sketchy but, once the worst of it passed, we've all just been waiting for you to wake up."

Hannah glanced towards the door.

"Speaking of Padma, I should probably go get her. She will want to check on you herself to make sure everything's working properly. After all, I'm just a *novice.*"

Hannah looked at Theo and rolled her eyes. He chuckled, obviously sharing in on some inside joke. She went to the door and left.

As soon as she was gone, Draco looked at Theo and lifted his eyebrows.

Theo's smile instantly faded. "What?"

Draco lifted his eyebrows higher.

"Don't give me that fucking look. She's just … Hannah's been really good to me these last few weeks, all right? I can talk to her. She's a lot like her grandmother. Even makes cottage pie the same."

His eyebrows stayed put.

"Stop it! It's not fucking like that! I'm not …" Theo suddenly began to cry. "I'm not even thinking about that sort of thing right now."

His eyes drifted over to something. Draco turned to see he was staring at a silver container decorated with an elaborate vine design that was set on the table. An urn. He gulped. Somehow, without even asking, he already knew who was inside. It was not just the heartbroken look on Theo's face, but also something in his gut. Like he had already been told.

Bronson was gone.

"When did it happen?" asked Draco, tears in his eyes and his damaged heart feeling heavy. Crookshanks jumped back onto the bed and rubbed against him.

"At Hogwarts," answered Theo. "My father … he did this."

"Why is he here?"

Theo wiped the tears out of his eyes, but that did not stop even more from forming. "I don't know. I didn't really know where else to put him so I brought him here to be with you. He wouldn't want to be buried with his family. He hated them."

"What about Quigley?"

Theo's face fell into a grimace. He bit his cheek.

"Theo … what about Quigley? Did he survive?"

"Yeah. He's fine." He paused. "Well, he's not *fine*, I guess. He's here. His leg was fucked up pretty bad, and he will never walk quite right again."

"And he hasn't said anything about Bronson's ashes?"

Theo grimaced again. "He might have mentioned something. Some lake Quigley's parents took them to every summer when they were kids. I guess one night when they were having a really dark conversation, Bronson mentioned that he wouldn't

mind resting there forever."

"So then why haven't you -?"

"Because I don't want to give his ashes to fucking Quigley!" snapped Theo. "He betrayed us! Because of him Granger was almost -"

"But she wasn't," said Draco. "Theo … you can't hold his best friend's ashes hostage."

"I'm not! I let him come and see them."

Draco sighed. "I know you're hurting, but it has to be a hundred times worse for him."

Theo grunted. "So are you saying *you* forgive him?"

"Fuck no!" spat Draco. "But he betrayed me just yesterday. He betrayed *you* over three weeks ago. Get the fuck over it. Bronson would want you to."

"You don't know that."

"Did you never fucking meet the bastard?" asked Draco. "Most forgiving bloke I knew. If he could look past all the shit we did as Death Eaters then what do you think he'd do for his best friend?"

Theo took a deep breath. He wiped away a tear as it slid down his cheek, looked right into Draco's eyes, and said, "I'm not ready to give him up yet."

Before Draco could respond, the door opened and Padma ran in.

"Malfoy!" she cried. She took out her wand and started running a dozen tests on him. "How do you feel?"

"Well, my chest hurts a bit."

Padma narrowed her eyes at him. He smirked.

"I feel fine otherwise. Maybe a little thirsty."

Theo immediately went to get him more water.

"And I want to see Hermione. So if someone could just scurry on over to Paris -"

"She should be back soon," said Hannah as she moved Crookshanks out of the

way again so Padma could work. "I'm sure she'll come straight here. She always does."

A high-pitched scream echoed into the room from the hallway. Padma and Hannah had not shut the door behind them. Pansy suddenly ran inside, limping horribly. She tossed Theo out of the way and practically jumped onto Draco.

Over her shoulder, Draco could see Ron standing in the doorway. Ron gave him a curt nod and he did the same.

"Parkinson, I said no running!" shouted Padma. "Does *no one* listen to my medical advice?"

"I'm sorry, I just … no one told me you were awake!" cried Pansy.

"It only just happened," said Padma, "so if you wouldn't mind getting off of him so I can continue checking -"

"Yeah, sorry." Pansy tried to step down but, before she could, Ron was magically there to scoop her up and put her down lightly on her good foot. "Thanks," she said, giving him a smile.

Draco watched the two of them with raised eyebrows. "Not in Paris, Weasel?" he asked.

"No, I just got back from there last night," he answered. "Harry ordered me to stay home for a few days."

"Is this home?"

"Might as well be …" muttered Theo.

"PAN-SY! PAN-SY!"

Pansy turned towards the door in a panic. "Uh oh. Sounds like my father got out again."

Padma let out an exasperated sigh.

"Don't worry, Patil, I'll get him." She began limping towards the door.

"Stop walking on that leg, Parkinson!" snapped Padma.

Pansy stopped walking. She turned and motioned to Ron, who hurried over,

crouching down and letting her jump on his back before carrying her out.

"I'm about ninety percent sure they're shagging," Theo said to Draco the moment they were gone.

"*Really*, Theo? Only ninety?" said Padma. "I caught the two of them sneaking out of a bloody broom closet the night before he left for the battle in Paris, and I don't think they were sweeping in there."

"Okay, okay," said Theo. "Ninety-five."

Everyone looked at him curiously.

"What? I'm trying to give Pansy the benefit of the doubt here. I mean, *Weasel*? *Really*?"

"Fucking gross," said Draco.

Something crashed in the hallway.

"Dad, put that down!"

Draco noticed the way Padma cringed. Taking his first good look at her since she arrived, he could now see how horrible she looked. There were dark circles under her eyes, her hair, which had always been so nicely kept, was dirty and sloppy, and her hands … she could just not seem to keep them steady.

"When was the last time you slept, Patil?"

Padma looked at him and frowned. "I don't have time to sleep. There's too much to do here."

"I can't imagine you'll be doing anyone any good if you're exhausting yourself."

"I need to keep busy." She pulled her wand away. "Everything looks all right, but I can't imagine you feel very great. I'll go get you a Healing Potion."

Padma tried to walk away but Draco grabbed her wrist. "Abbott, go and fetch the potion for me, will you?" he said. "And, Theo, I could really use some tea."

Hannah and Theo both nodded, and scurried out of the room.

"Take a seat, Patil," said Draco, patting an empty section of mattress. Padma sat down slowly. "How are you?"

"Fine," Padma said quickly. "Things have just been crazy here. A few more Healers have come forth, but we're still incredibly short-staffed for all of the people -"

"Stop blabbering, Patil, you *know* what I mean. Are you all right?"

Padma started to nod, but then she looked into Draco's eyes and, suddenly, she could not hold it in any longer. She burst into tears. "No. I … I'm not all right, Malfoy. I'm not *going* to be all right. I lost my sister in the first Battle of Hogwarts, I lost my parents shortly after, and, now, I've lost my boyfriend. I have no one left."

Draco sighed. "That's not true -"

"But it is! I've been working hard to keep it together, and I have *tried* to sleep, but every time I close my eyes I see Ernie staring back at me with those dead eyes. I can't get that damn image out of my mind."

On instinct, Draco reached out and grabbed her hand. He half expected her to fight him on it, but she did not. "I used to have the same problem. After I lost my mother."

Padma sniffled. "You did?"

Draco nodded.

"What did you do about it?"

"Never slept, overworked myself, and became one of the Dark Lord's top Death Eaters."

Padma chuckled, then sucked it back. "That sounds awful."

Draco shrugged. "As Hermione would tell you, I'm not very good at taking care of myself," he said. "But, eventually, the images *did* stop. It takes time, but you'll get there."

She nodded and looked down at her hands folded on her lap. "Sometimes, Ernie and I would lay awake at night and talk about our future. We'd have a house in the country, preferably by a lake where our four children could swim with our black Labrador, Otis. For some reason, he always wanted a black Labrador named Otis." She smiled. "When you and Hermione came around, he *insisted* that the two of you would come over every Sunday for dinner. He really wanted you to like him. I used to joke that he had a little man-crush on you."

Draco sighed deeply and said, "I did like him. I was even willing to look past the whole Hufflepuff thing." He smirked.

Padma burst out laughing, even as she continued to cry. "Well, I'm glad his desperate attempts to make you his friend weren't in vain."

A deep growl came from the floor behind them. They both turned to see Crookshanks standing below Fawkes' perch. The cat stretched up and clawed at the phoenix's tail feathers. Fawkes squawked loudly, causing the cat to go running.

"I suppose you've noticed you have a new friend," said Padma.

"Mr. Platypus," said Draco, holding up the stuffed teddy bear. "Yeah."

Padma laughed and took Mr. Platypus from him. "A teddy from Teddy," she said with a smile. "But I was actually talking about the phoenix. They're very stubborn creatures and difficult to domesticate. You should feel honored that he's chosen you."

"Why did he choose me?" asked Draco as he continued to gaze at Fawkes.

Padma shrugged. "I don't know. I guess he saw something in you that he liked. Either way, I think you and Hermione are going to have your hands full with two pets that are too intelligent for their own good."

Right on cue, Crookshanks jumped onto the bed and made himself comfortable on Draco's lap. He kept his eyes on Fawkes the entire time with what Draco could have sworn was a small smile tugging at his little cat mouth. The bloody animal was trying to claim his dominance. Not to mention Draco.

Giving in and letting the cat stay, Draco scooted over in the bed, then patted the spot next to him. "Come on, Patil. It's time for you to take a bloody nap."

Padma looked at the spot skeptically. "I can't imagine Hermione will be happy to find you in bed with another woman when she gets back."

"She'll understand," said Draco. "I'll even let you cuddle with Mr. Platypus."

Padma smiled and looked down at the bear she was still holding. "I can't sleep for long," she said.

"I'll wake you if you're needed."

With a small sigh, Padma kicked off her shoes and put her legs on the bed. She scooted back and made herself comfortable next to Draco. As she closed her eyes, she could not stop herself from asking, "Draco … did you see Ernie on the other side?"

Draco thought she was being delusional, but then he was suddenly overcome with a vision of a glowing figure with Ernie's face waving at him. He smiled. "You know, I think I did."

"And how did he look?"

"Happy … He looked happy."

<div align="center">XXX</div>

Hermione walked into St. Mungo's with Harry and Ginny by her side. They had just arrived back from Paris and this was, of course, their first stop. And Hermione's last. She could not believe she had let Harry convince her to leave Draco's side for nearly half a day.

The hospital was bustling with activity. More and more people were volunteering to help each day, but the numbers of healthy people never quite matched the numbers of injured ones.

"Hermione, there you are!"

She looked over to see her mother, Emily, walking over with Andromeda and Teddy. Emily immediately gave her hug, as she always did since they were reunited almost two weeks earlier.

"Sorry," said Hermione, holding her mom for a few seconds extra today. Seeing all of those happy, crying people in Paris had really exhausted her. Everyone was so grateful. They had not gotten to the messy part where Muggles and wizards would surely clash over politics, but she knew once they had their world back it was bound to happen. For now, though, she was enjoying seeing hope return to so many faces. "We got a bit caught up over there. Have you been here long?"

"Not at all," said Andromeda. "We made a stop so Teddy could pick some more flowers for Draco."

Teddy smiled and held out the small, broken bouquet so Hermione could see.

"Very lovely, Teddy," said Hermione, crouching down and giving him a hug. "I am sure Draco will just love them."

"Dad, could you please just sit down?"

Hermione looked around at the sound of Pansy's voice. When she found her, she watched as Ron forced Stuart into a chair, handing him something that he immediately started fiddling with. Pansy was on Ron's back and, per her request, he lowered her into the chair next to him. Not realizing that anyone of interest was watching, Ron leaned down and kissed her.

"Gross!" Ginny shouted from across the reception area. "Get a broom closet!"

Ron whipped around and stared wide-eyed at his sister. Then he saw Hermione. He stepped forward.

"Hermione!"

Hermione went white. There was something very serious about the way he was looking at her. Too serious.

"Draco, he -"

Hermione did not give Ron the chance to finish before she was taking off running for the stairs. She did not care what the end of that sentence was. If it had to do with Draco then she needed to be by his side.

It did not take her long at all to get to the fourth floor. Then she was sprinting down the hall, skidding to a stop by his door and throwing it open.

Her heart stopped. All eyes in the room fell upon her. Fawkes on his perch, Hannah and Theo drinking tea with chairs pulled up by Draco's bed, Padma popping awake by his side, and Crookshanks on his lap. But Hermione cared about none of these eyes, because the only ones she saw were the two pools of liquid silver, wide open and looking right at her.

"Hermione."

Hermione burst into tears as she sprinted across that room, accidentally squashing Crookshanks as she climbed across the bed to Draco. She fell into his arms and hugged him tightly, letting him pull her face back so they could kiss passionately.

"Draco! The one fucking day I leave!" she cried. "Are you all right? How is he?" She looked at Padma, who was busy readjusting herself after ungracefully rolling off the bed the moment they started to snog.

"Everything looks good," said Padma. "Of course, he'll still need to be here a while. Until his chest heals properly."

Hermione nodded very seriously. "You hear that, Draco? You have no excuse not to lay here and heal this time. You will remain in this bed until you are one-hundred percent. Understand?"

Draco smiled as tears filled his eyes. He could not stop gazing at her, his hand running through her hair as he took in how beautiful she looked. "Whatever you say, love." He leaned in and kissed her again, this time soft. Tender.

Hermione whimpered as she rubbed her cheek against his. "Never scare me like that again."

"Malfoy."

Draco and Hermione looked over to see Harry standing in the doorway. His mouth was slightly open as his hands clenched shut. He took several deep breaths before taking a few slow steps forward, then they quickened and, before long, he was by Draco's side, leaning in and hugging him.

"Ah!" Draco screamed. "What the fuck is happening?"

"You saved my life," cried Harry. "I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"Just buy me some fucking chocolates or something, now get off!"

Harry pulled away and wiped his eyes. "Sorry. I just didn't know how else to say it."

A second later, Harry was shoved out of the way and Ginny was hugging Draco.

"Ah, much better," said Draco, hugging her back. "Breasts really do make all the difference."

Ginny smacked the back of his head but kept on hugging.

"Do I have bweasts?"

Still mid-hug, Draco looked over the side of the bed to see Teddy standing there. He was holding a small bouquet of broken purple flowers and smiling widely.

"No, but you are the exception to the rule, kid," said Draco.

Ginny pulled back and helped Teddy onto the bed. While he and Draco hugged,

Hermione tried to climb off of it but Draco wrapped his arm around her waist and held on tight.

Teddy handed Draco the flowers, which he stuck in the center of the vase on his nightstand.

"Where's Mr. Pwatypus?" asked Teddy, looking all around.

It took Padma a moment to realize she was still holding the stuffed bear. She stepped forward and handed it to him. Teddy took it proudly.

"Me and my gwama brought him to take care of you while you slept. He woke you up like in the faiwytales."

Draco smiled fondly at Teddy and ruffled his hair. There was nothing more beautiful than the innocence of a child. Even though Teddy had been raised in such a horrible world, he was still so happy and optimistic. Draco would have to remember to take a page from his book.

With the mention of Teddy's grandmother, Draco looked towards the door. Sure enough, Andromeda was standing there next to some woman who looked vaguely familiar.

Andromeda was already crying, but she cried even harder when he smiled at her. She hurried over and took her turn hugging him, perhaps the only person who did it with such care so as not to agitate his wound.

While glancing over Andromeda's shoulder, Draco noticed as Hermione beckoned the familiar looking woman over. He still could not place her, not until she was by Hermione's side and watching him with two amber eyes. He gulped.

"Draco, I want you to meet someone," said Hermione as soon as Andromeda pulled away. She took the woman's hand in hers and smiled brightly. "This is my mom, Emily. Mom, this is Draco."

Draco wanted to say something nice to her, preferably clever and about what a great daughter she had, but all that came out was, "Hi," in a rather squeaky voice.

Emily smiled. "Hi, Draco. I really want to hug you but I don't want to overwhelm you with the growing crowd." She looked around at everyone in the room. Hermione, Andromeda, Teddy, Harry, Ginny, Padma, Theo, Hannah. Not to mention Fawkes and Crookshanks.

"It's all right," said Draco. "If bloody Potter hugged me then I can't really deny

anyone else their right."

He was happy when she laughed. It was good that she understood his sense of humor. A lot of people really just did not appreciate it enough.

Hermione readjusted herself so her mother could lean over and hug him. The moment they touched, Emily burst into tears, holding him tighter than she ever meant to and repeatedly saying, "Thank you," into his ear. When she pulled away, she looked into his eyes and smiled. "You are part of our family now, even before you take the vows promised by that large ring on my daughter's finger. But that does not mean you do not have to follow through," she added with a wink. "Children with your eyes and Hermione's curly hair would be unstoppable!"

"Mom!" shouted Hermione, who had turned bright red.

"Would you call that curly?" asked Theo, pursing his eyebrows. "Huh, and all this time I've been comparing it to a bush."

Hermione snarled at him. Draco laughed but stopped quickly when it began to hurt his chest.

Shortly after that, Padma cleared everyone out so that Draco could get his rest. Only Hermione and Theo stayed behind. Theo did not even mind when all the other two did was lie on the bed snogging for a good hour. Just sitting there while they did that felt normal to him. Comforting even. Especially with Bronson sitting right there next to him. He could not look at that urn without tearing up.

"Did Blaise and Daphne make it out all right?" asked Draco once Hermione had settled in his arms.

"Yeah," answered Theo. "They're in America right now helping to start a rebellion over there with Wood and Chang."

"And Goyle … he didn't make it. Right?" While Draco had not seen it happen, he just had a feeling that he could not shake.

"No, he didn't," said Theo with a sigh. "Another victim of my father." He paused for a moment while wiping a few tears from his eyes. "I should have killed the fucking bastard sooner. I don't know why I didn't."

"Because he was your father, Theo," said Hermione. "No matter how much you hated him, he was still blood, and those bonds are the hardest to break."

"In the end, it wasn't." Theo could not stop himself from looking at Bronson's urn

once again. More tears fell.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

"It's probably Hannah," said Theo. "She wanted to bring you something to eat once she got the okay from Padma."

"Come in!" Hermione called.

The door opened slowly and someone limped in on crutches, stopping when he saw all of their faces sink. "Hi," said Quigley in a dry voice.

"Hello," Draco said coldly.

Theo put his hand on the urn and pushed it as far away from the door as he could get it.

"Theo, stop doing that," snapped Draco. "I already told you that you can't hold Bronson hostage."

Theo grunted before moving the urn a little towards Quigley again. But only a little.

"What do you want, Quigley?" asked Draco, tightening his grip on Hermione.

"I heard you were awake," said Quigley. "Parkinson and I are in the same ward. Similar injuries, you know." He motioned down towards his bandaged leg. "She accidentally let it slip and I just …" He sighed. "I wanted to see that you were all right."

"He's fine, no thanks to you, you fucking -"

"Theo!" shouted Draco. "Bring the bloody hostility down a notch, will you?"

Theo crossed his arms and grumbled.

Quigley stared down at the floor and wiped at his eyes. "I never wanted any of you to get hurt."

"And what exactly did you think was going to happen when you turned us over to the Dark Lord?" asked Draco. "That he would show mercy?"

"No, I … I don't know what I thought. All I know is that I was given an ultimatum with no time to think. I just wanted to get Fiona out and then I was going to go back for you, even if it cost me my own life. But she wouldn't go and now she's dead

because of it. My little sister … and Bronson, he - Oh, god, fucking Bronson!"

Quigley had to lean against the wall to keep himself and his crutches from toppling over as he sobbed uncontrollably into his hands.

Draco looked over at the urn as his own tears filled his eyes. Then something flashed in his mind. Bronson's face. And … a voice.

*"I don't want him to be alone …"*

Draco could not quite place the moment he heard those words. It seemed like a dream, but he had felt something similar when he had that memory of his mother. Her soul had spoken to him, and, now, he was sure that Bronson's had, too.

"Because of you I almost lost Hermione," he said. "They wanted to rape her and, if they had, you better fucking believe that I would not be saying what I am about to say."

Draco paused and took a deep breath. Quigley looked up at him hopefully.

"You betrayed me, Quigley. You were one of the few people in this world I trusted and you put the girl I love in danger, not to mention my aunt and Teddy. I can never forgive you for that." He took another deep breath. "But if you hadn't been so incredibly stupid the battle would not have happened and the Dark Lord would still be in power."

Quigley started to step forward.

"Stop," said Draco, holding out his hand. "I'm bloody fucking pissed at you right now. I want you to go and I don't want to see you in my room again."

Quigley already looked a bit sickly, but now his skin turned ashen.

"But when I am better, the four of us are going to take Bronson to that place you told Theo about," he looked at Theo, "and we're going to let him go."

Theo stared back at Draco with watery eyes for a moment, but moved them towards the floor as he began to cry.

Quigley looked at the urn and gulped. "Then what?"

Draco shrugged. "Then I don't know. I don't think our friendship can ever be what it was, but I'm willing to give it a shot. For no other reason than that's what Bronson would want. He loved you, and he wouldn't want you to be alone."

"I believe that," said Hermione, smiling softly at Draco as she entwined her hand with his. "If Draco is going to give it a shot then I will, too."

They all looked at Theo. His wet eyes were still on the floor. He slowly lifted them, looking at Draco and Hermione before finally looking at Quigley. He only had his eyes on him for a moment. Just long enough to give a small nod. Then he was looking back at the floor.

Quigley smiled a little as he continued to cry. "I will see you when you are better then."

He readjusted his crutches and opened the door, taking one last look back at them before wobbling out.

"I already talked to Ron and Parkinson," said Hermione as soon as he was gone. "They agreed to make sure he's not alone until we're ready."

Draco smirked. "Already planning to forgive him, were you?"

Hermione smirked back. "Like you said. It's what Bronson would have wanted."

Theo said nothing.

Later that night, Draco lay awake in his bed. He was trying to sleep but, after losing three weeks of his life, he could not bring himself to do it.

"Draco, I know you're awake."

Draco opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Hermione, who was sitting loyally in a chair beside his bed. She smiled and reached out, brushing a few stray hairs off of his forehead.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Never better," he said with a smirk.

"I don't suppose you're up for a walk?"

Draco cocked an eyebrow.

"There is something I want to show you."

"A walk sounds just lovely," said Draco. He lifted the teddy bear he was still holding. "Could Mr. Platypus come, too?"

Hermione chuckled softly. "I think Mr. Platypus would be much happier here." She took him from Draco and placed him carefully on the nightstand.

Hermione stood and walked over to Theo, who was asleep in a chair with his head resting on the table, just beside the urn. He had not wanted to leave that night, and Draco was not about to force him.

"Theo," Hermione whispered. "I'm going to show him now. Could we borrow your cloak and shoes?"

Theo nodded without opening his eyes.

"Thank you." Hermione kissed his forehead.

He already had his shoes off and placed neatly under his chair. Hermione handed them to Draco and then went over to a small closet where she pulled out two cloaks. She helped Draco out of the bed before putting on his cloak, followed by her own.

Draco put his good arm around Hermione's shoulders. She helped him walk towards the door. They headed down the long hallway until they reached the stairs. Hermione got Draco onto the first one, then cast a spell to move all of the steps until they were at the top. Draco read the words on the door: ROOF ACCESS.

"Come on," said Hermione, gently urging him forward.

She waved her hand and the door opened. They slowly walked outside. Draco looked at the sky and saw that it was overcast. Normally, on nights like this in London, the city would be pitch black with nothing but a few twinkles from lampposts littering the foggy air, but not tonight. Even before they reached the edge, Draco could see the lights of a great city shining all around them.

They stopped walking once they reached the barrier. Draco put his hands on it and looked out at London. It was not quite as bright as it once was, several streets still as dark and dreary as when the Dark Lord ruled here, but it was better. So, so much better.

"Isn't it beautiful?" said Hermione as she smiled beside him. "People have been working day and night to bring it alive again. There is one man that spends all of his time going from building to building just changing light bulbs."

"What's a light bulb?" asked Draco.

Hermione chuckled. "Oh, right. *You* wouldn't know." She leaned against his shoulder. "It is what Muggles use to make light. Theo and I have been coming up here every night and watching them grow. It really makes what we've done seem real."

Draco grabbed her hand and entwined it with his on the barrier. He used his thumb to fiddle with the ring she wore. "How is Theo?" he asked.

Hermione sighed. "He's a lot better than he was. I think he was even more frightened that we were going to lose you than I was. After Bronson, I don't know if he would have been able to handle it. He just … feels so guilty." She paused. "I'm glad he's warmed to Hannah. I think it's good for him to spend time with someone who doesn't remind him of Bronson. I've already warned her not to get a crush on him." She smiled.

"Warning not heeded," said Draco.

"Yes, I've noticed. But she knows about Bronson, and that Theo's confused."

"It's a shame they never got the chance to figure out what it was they had." Draco closed his eyes. He knew the words were not his own; somewhere deep down.

Hermione sighed. "It really is."

The two of them stood there, staring out at the city for a long time.

"There is one more thing I wanted to show you," said Hermione after a while.

She pulled away from him and smiled coyly. "As it turns out, when your fiancé is in a coma, you find yourself with a lot of free time on your hands while you're waiting for him to wake up. Took you long enough, by the way."

Draco laughed.

"So I made a point to keep busy and I learned something. In record time according to McGonagall."

Draco's mouth fell open. He watched closely as Hermione took a few more steps back, keeping her eyes on him while grinning widely. Her face began to change before his very eyes. Her mouth became pointed, her eyes beady and soon she was completely covered in black feathers. Within moments, a small, black bird was flying up to him and landing on his shoulder. He looked at her and saw her amber eyes.

Draco smiled. "It looks like you've gotten your wings."

Hermione pecked his cheek with her beak before taking a lap around the roof, transfiguring back into her human form as she landed. "I know it's no falcon but, let's be honest, I was never going to be anything that fierce."

Draco took a few careful steps forward and cupped her face in his hands. He kissed her softly. "It's perfect," he breathed into her mouth.

Hermione smiled against his lips. "I actually think that we might have more control over what we become than originally thought. I sang that song to you every day, and then I became it."

"You sang to me?" asked Draco.

"Yes," said Hermione. "To try and bring you back to me. Before you …" She closed her eyes and gulped. "Before you died, you were singing it. Do you remember?"

Draco shook his head. "No. I remember hearing music, but I thought the words were only playing in my head."

"It was Fawkes' song. He was singing it as he came down upon you, and you sang with him. Then you died. Right there in my arms." Hermione got really quiet for a moment, her eyes sinking downward. "Padma zapped you back to life in a panic. Just long enough for Fawkes to shed his tear. I had never been so happy before, and I just … I started singing to you. Right then. I know it sounds sick, but it really was the most beautiful moment I have ever experienced."

Draco pressed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. It was all there. Deep down. These memories. "I heard you," he whispered. "Singing to me."

Hermione smiled as tears fell between their cheeks. Whether they were his or hers did not matter. It was all the same. "Really?"

Draco nodded against her. "I think that's why I came back. To be with you." He pulled back a little, still cupping her face as he gazed into her sparkling eyes. "Hermione … do I deserve you yet?"

Hermione began to weep as she grabbed his cloak and pulled him until his lips met hers. Their kiss was hard yet soft, sweet yet passionate, and it felt just as perfect as it always did.

Through her tears and their entangled lips, Hermione whispered, "Yes, Draco, you

deserve me and I deserve you. You saved my best friend and, with that, the world. You may not get the praise you deserve for what you did, but I will never forget how brave you were."

The two of them continued to kiss into the night. Eventually, they found their way to a wall and sat against it, watching the way the lights reflected in the dark, misty sky.

"I had them bury your father next to your mother," said Hermione as they wiggled their entwined hands. "I hope you don't mind, but I also had her put into a proper casket and placed a tombstone. I know you always wanted her to have one. I hope you're not angry I chose it without you."

Draco shook his head. "You did that for me?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Did you go there? To Malfoy Manor?"

Hermione took a deep breath and said, "I did, but not inside. I don't think I will ever be able to go inside. But I wanted to make sure they didn't half-ass the job because your father was a Death Eater. If it wasn't for him then we might never have gotten out of Hogwarts. He deserved a proper burial."

Draco nodded.

"I thought we could go and see them. Once you're better, that is."

He nodded again. "I would like that."

Just then, a loud string of thunder resonated through the sky. Hermione winced, squeezing Draco's hand tighter while burying her face in his chest. But she did not cry. Did not run. Instead, once it passed, she looked up at the sky and said, "Looks like rain."

Draco smiled. "Did you want to go inside?"

Hermione thought for a moment, but shook her head. "No. Let's stay just a little bit longer."

Draco lifted the arm he had around her waist and began stroking her hair. Hermione closed her eyes, looking so peaceful as the two of them sat outside in the open for the first time without any spell to shield them.

This was it. Draco and Hermione finally had the freedom they had desired for so long. The world was not perfect, and it was never going to be, but it was better. It would be years before it could be completely rebuilt and, even then, things would never be as they once were.

But Draco and Hermione were here. They were together. And they were free. Most importantly, they were free.

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*
*Take these broken wings and learn to fly*
*All your life*
*You were only waiting for this moment to arise.*
*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*
*Take these sunken eyes and learn to see*
*All your life*
*You were only waiting for this moment to be free.*
*Blackbird fly, Blackbird fly*
*Into the light of the dark black night.*
*Blackbird fly, Blackbird fly*
*Into the light of the dark black night.*
*Blackbird singing in the dead of night*
*Take these broken wings and learn to fly*
*All your life*
*You were only waiting for this moment to arise*
*You were only waiting for this moment to arise*
*You were only waiting for this moment to arise.*

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**Extra A/N: I know many of you probably wanted an epilogue, but I feel stories like this are best left open. I do have some ideas about their future, which definitely includes a child named Bronson Ernest Malfoy - Not Baldric or he would kill them. ;o)**

**I really loved writing this story. I have not been this inspired in a long time and I want to find a way to make it *not* fanfiction, but A LOT of changes would have to be made. Any suggestions would be greatly appreciated.**

**I had every intention of leaving fanfiction for a while once this was finished. The only story I had in my head was a Lucius/Narcissa one, but it is also a bit dark and I really need to get out of that place.**

**But, of course, right when I decided to quit, a new Draco/Hermione story came into my head. Figures. It is not dark. More like a romantic dramedy,**

haha. My other stories all deal with our hero and heroine in their twenties, but this one would actually take place when they're in their forties. It shouldn't be that long and I think I'm going to make it my NaNoWriMo project. Of course, I thought CaBW was going to be only around 100,000 words and look how *that* turned out.

I forgot to mention this for the first chunk of people who read this chapter (sorry!) but since I have had so many requests for it, I am considering writing a few Theo/Bronson one-shots, mainly just filling in the gaps when they were alone (i.e. Christmas on the balcony and the night Theo finally went into Bronson's bedroom).

So yes, you will probably be hearing from me again very soon. Thanks again for reading and reviewing! You really know how to restore faith to a struggling writer. ;o)

UPDATES:

The first two chapters of 'The Confusion of Theo Nott' a.k.a. the Theo and Bronson oneshots have been posted, so please go check them out!

Also, I now have a Tumblr. Please follow me for updates on all of my writing and all that jazz. lstoddardhancock . tumblr . com